

Francesco Mugheddu

# Obstinacy in the Service of Democracy, a Memoir

*Foreword by Paolo Fresu*

*Afterword by Gerolamo Spreafico*



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Via del Pioppeto 24

38121 TRENTO

Tel. 0461 950690

Fax 0461 950698

[www.erickson.it](http://www.erickson.it)

[info@erickson.it](mailto:info@erickson.it)

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Francesco Mugheddu

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Translation by Chiara Rotondi





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*This book is dedicated to my parents.*

*To Rosetta, my kind loving mother,  
and to my father Giovanni,  
an honest man devoted to his family*

All the photographs in this book were taken by the author, unless otherwise specified. To contact the author please write to [francesco.mugheddu@yahoo.com](mailto:francesco.mugheddu@yahoo.com).

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*Let no one ever come to you  
without leaving happier.*

Mother Teresa of Calcutta



# Foreword

I can't remember the exact moment when Francesco Mugheddu and I first met, but it was certainly a long time ago. Besides, the precise date is of no great importance.

What I do remember is that we first met in Sardinia — our island; the place that both of us have always loved when we were there and when we were far away.

Over the years, our friendship has been fuelled by the long journeys that have guided our lives, enriched by our respective experiences, back to our island.

We often lost touch but we always met again. And even if the long journeys put a distance between us, it was thanks to those same journeys that we met once again.

It could even be, as Francesco says in his book, that we first met in Berchidda, during one of the summer festivals that I have been organising for many years; on that occasion my village becomes the centre of the world and, therefore, it is in itself a kind of journey.

His book is about this. It is about the travels and encounters in life that make a person thick-skinned. It is through these that we form a hard protective shell and that at the same time we become more vulnerable *vis à vis* the world.

Francesco narrates facts — and writes about himself — from behind a protective shell but also with a sincerity that reveals his weaknesses, which paradoxically represent his strength.

And this very strength is what gave him a reason, in all these years, to face the complex realities in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America in his role as International Observer in the service of peace.

His obstinacy in wanting to travel the winding roads of peoples in need and the progression of multiple sclerosis are the key to reading this real-life story.

Therefore, *Obstinacy in the Service of Democracy* is a warning and an example at the same time. It reminds us how delicate our relationships with our neighbours are, and it is also a challenge to everyday life, with its difficulties and its successes, to show how the desire to live to the full always has the upper hand.

As Francesco wrote and the Italian-French pianist Michel Petrucciani said, the meaning of our life can only be found in our soul and it is our soul that shows us the way.

It's up to us to listen to it and take heed.



Paolo Fresu  
Paris, October 2014



Paolo Fresu at La Palma Theatre, Rome, 17 July 2004.



# Introduction

It took me a long time to resume writing this brief account of my recent experiences, and now the content and structure of the book have taken quite a different form. All in all, I thought it was more important to write about what, for many years now, I have considered clear «signs» that guide my choices in life. I chose to entitle my brief work *Obstinacy in the Service of Democracy* for two reasons: first, because I am very stubborn, which is, indeed, a characteristic common to many of us Sardinians; this very stubbornness has always fuelled my determination to offer my help in strengthening democracy in the countries where I went on Missions. And in the second place because I am very fond of the record of my fellow countryman, the jazz musician Paolo Fresu, which is appropriately entitled *Ostinato*. Jazz, which for many years now has been the music I prefer, plays an important part in my life.

I have written these memoirs out of the need to share my experiences in work and life, dating back to my very first International Mission as Observer in 1998, which started almost by chance and

then carried on with ever-increasing involvement and conviction. At the same time, I also wanted to show how my illness, which was diagnosed in September 1999, did not prevent me from making the most of my life.

I didn't want to interrupt the narrative thread, so I concluded my work with the chapter *Democracy and human rights. The European Union and Election Observation Missions*, which illustrates the theoretical foundations and the constitutional aspects of the Missions which I took part in.

I hope this narrative can somehow interest the reader, and that it might act as a stimulus, helping to reinforce the belief that you should never give up what you believe in, despite the difficulties you may encounter in life.

I apologise for any inaccuracies, due to the fact that my diary is sometimes based on memories that were not put down in writing.



## Chapter 1

# How it all started, the discovery of my illness and Kosovo

My interest in issues of international politics, particularly in the peaceful resolution of conflicts, dates back to when I was still studying Physics at university. I believe that my passion for social issues in general, which among other things led to a period of dissatisfaction with my studies in 1989-1990 — during the climax of the Iraq-Kuwait crisis that resulted in the military campaign against Iraq — was the very reason that influenced my decision to take part in international peace missions. At that time I didn't even imagine I could ever be diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS)...

I have always been very curious, even as a child, so, when I grew up, my decision to study physics was not random: I am convinced that it is the study of physics that enables us to understand the nature of the universe to the highest degree. Therefore, in my opinion, focusing on the «smallest», on the elements closest to us, is the key to addressing the problems of life, however big they may seem.

In July 1996, before the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was over, something happened that influenced my future choices in life sig-

nificantly: I took part as a volunteer in a march for peace between Croatia (Split) and Bosnia-Herzegovina. On that occasion I realised that my «mission» was to commit myself in some way or other to help strengthen democracy in a country, like Bosnia-Herzegovina, that was striving to recover from a tragic conflict. During the march towards Sarajevo I became more familiar with the tragedy of the population that had experienced the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I also reflected on the importance of every single effort, even seemingly insignificant efforts, because they contribute nonetheless to make change possible: although not sensational, every little helps. Sleeping in a large tent near the Cathedral of Medjugorje was incredible: this town had been blessed with a kind of «divine protection», as everything around it had been heavily bombed, whereas Medjugorje had been spared, there were no traces of war there.

In June 1998, after being turned down in 1996 and in 1997, I doggedly and successfully applied again for the third (and last...) time for a place on the training course of the Civilian Personnel of Humanitarian Operations, Peace-keeping and Election Observation Missions organised by the *Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna* of Pisa.

While I was still attending the course, which had always had an excellent reputation, a new opportunity came my way: my first assignment! I had been selected by the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MAE) to participate, as a supervisor, in the OSCE election Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina, due to take place in September. The supervisor has joint responsibility for the conduct of a polling station, as does the presiding officer of a national polling station and, if the need arises, he can report any irregularities to his national equivalent.

My first election Mission was very promising; I worked with Gunilla, who was on her first election Mission like me. Gunilla (100% Swedish: tall, blonde with blue eyes), and I got on like a house on fire. We were assigned to two polling stations located in the same building, facing each other, so we could leave our respective polling

stations from time to time, discuss and clear up our doubts and exchange information on how to go ahead with the job. Thanks to our cooperation our tasks were carried out smoothly, even though I did have a clash with the chairperson of my polling station... I was very lucky to have Sandra as an interpreter; she had had a terrible experience during the Serbian siege — a sniper had killed a friend of hers right before her eyes while they were crossing a bridge. Sandra had understood perfectly well what I needed: not only an interpreter, but also somebody who could help me understand what was going on, by carefully observing the behaviour of the members of the polling station, and then telling me off the record. Thanks to Sandra I gathered that the chairperson's behaviour was illegal, since he tried to influence voters so as to favour certain candidates.

She also opened my eyes with respect to other irregularities carried out by the chairperson, so I made up my mind to speak to him in no uncertain terms and reminded him that certain behaviour was not allowed. As a result, he took offence, left the polling station and didn't come back. At that point I had to deal alone with the various members of the polling station who turned to me concerning the procedures to follow. Notwithstanding the heavier workload, in the end the final counting of the votes, albeit with some irregularities, was acceptable. Sandra and I had a very special relationship and I was almost falling in love with her, although I loved my girlfriend, Giulia... So one evening, when I was trying to get through to Giulia from a telephone box, I almost shouted into her voicemail «I love you, I love you!» It was, in fact, just a way of reminding myself that *she* was the one I loved and that I mustn't get too involved with Sandra.

Although the NATO forces were at work, the mine clearers were still too few to clear the whole of Sarajevo... I got acquainted with a family who told me that they mastered the demining techniques thanks to the police. They had thus made their home safe and... that was just what they were doing in their garden at that very moment!

They led me along a narrow path to their garden, urging me to follow their steps carefully without leaving the path, since the rest of the ground was still mined. Thank God we eventually managed to reach the garden safe and sound.

I didn't have to wait long for the second assignment: in November that same year the MAE selected me as an Observer for the OSCE election Mission in Albania. The OSCE — Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe — is responsible, among other things, for the observation of elections in Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union. An Election Observation Mission Observer works with another person from a different country. The team thus formed analyses all the activities related to the electoral process in the assigned area of responsibility, but under no circumstances is allowed to interfere with the same. I was happy because I realised that my name was circulating at the MAE, but I didn't feel quite ready yet to leave my job as a high school Maths and Physics teacher — my only regular employment since I had graduated.

The turning point in my life took place in 1999. During the first half of the year I became very interested in the situation in Kosovo, where the Albanian ethnic majority (over 90% of Kosovo's population), despite having an autonomous statute dating back to the constitution of Tito's Yugoslav Republic, suddenly found itself devoid of such statute, which was revoked under the pressure of the Serbian government headed by Slobodan Milošević. Among other things, the status of the Albanian language as co-official language in Kosovo with Serbo-Croatian was suppressed, the autonomous schools were closed and Albanian Kosovar administrative officials and teachers were replaced with Serbs or people loyal to Serbia. From 1989 to 1995 the majority of the Albanian population of Kosovo carried out a non-violent campaign of resistance led by the LDK party and its leader Ibrahim Rugova, also known as the Gandhi of Kosovo. Some war veterans set up armed forces after the end of the war in Bosnia

and Herzegovina. This «army» with separatist intentions spread very quickly among the Kosovars (mostly Muslims) and in time became increasingly popular among the ethnic Albanian population. All hope for the triumph of nonviolent resistance in Kosovo (almost a dream!), which had given me so much inspiration, was gone... In the meantime, there was an escalation in the Kosovo conflict and in March 1999 all hope for a peaceful solution was sadly lost, as the NATO bombings began. These bombings were also backed by the Italian government; therefore, the Italian population was involved. The bombings lasted until 10 June 1999, when the peace agreements were signed. Various international and non-governmental organizations then started to base part of their activities in Kosovo, opening their offices first of all in the main town, Pristina.

A more promising future for Kosovo was dawning, although it was still rather hazy... the United Nations would temporarily govern Kosovo, delegating to other organizations, the OSCE in the first place, tasks such as the administration of justice, the proper use of the media, the study of political parties and of non-governmental organizations, democratization. It was at that point that I really got going in order to try to grab the opportunities that were starting to take shape. In time I had grown tired of teaching Maths and Physics. I wanted to work in a new field which I felt not only competent in, but which I also felt close to my ideals of being able to help those who suffer, within an international context. Just then, I heard about the forthcoming launch of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, as the OSCE had already contributed to setting up refugee camps on the Kosovo border. In mid-June I called the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to try to find out what chances I had of working with the OSCE in Kosovo, though I didn't exclude the opportunity of working for other International Organizations, whether governmental or non-governmental. I wasn't too confident that my attempts would be successful but, on the other hand, I had nothing to lose. Besides, my name was

becoming familiar at the Human Rights office of the MAE: I had attended the course in Pisa and taken part in two election Missions, both with the OSCE and in the Balkans. Not even ten days later I received the phone call from Rome that I had been hoping for: a MAE official told me that the OSCE Mission was due to start soon, and that, if I was still free, I had been chosen to work as an official in the Democratization Department. Wow! And they even asked if I was still interested! Of course I was! This was the chance of my life: to work in Kosovo with an important International Organization and, what's more, in the Democratization Department. I couldn't have wished for anything more.

It was early summer and I thought it best to prepare myself from a psychological, intellectual and physical point of view for my first big Mission, although, looking back, my whole life had been a bit like a Mission... I have always been convinced that what we do must be done whole-heartedly. When I taught Maths and Physics at school I put everything into my job. Indeed, I believe that teaching is one of the most important jobs in our society because it helps young people to lay the foundations for their future.

Teachers can be role models; they are in a position to discuss with their students the problems of our society and find ways of addressing them.

But the time had come to get ready for the great Mission... And what place could be more suitable than S'Archittu, my *buen retiro*? This sea resort on the west coast of Sardinia where I had spent my summer holidays since I was a child was the right place. I brushed up on my English, the working language of the Mission; I kept abreast of the developments in the Kosovo crisis and looked into what had triggered the present situation.

Meanwhile, I often called the MAE, but the invariable answer was that, like every other time that a new Mission was due, timing was not yet known; I might, however, be asked to leave at any time.

This uncertainty increased the sense of precariousness that had always been part of my life and that would characterise it in the years to come... I didn't lose heart, though I was aware that if I accepted that position my future prospects would change radically: I would probably have to give up teaching. However precarious my job was, my teaching position was renewed at the beginning of each school year. And I would have to give up my points of reference, my friends and my girlfriend, to head towards a hazy and uncertain future: the OMiK Mission. For how long? And after that? The idea of working with the OSCE in Kosovo was incredibly tempting, starting from the international context in which I would operate and which was what I wanted more than anything else, far from the places where I had lived all my life. The idea of leaving Sardinia, where I had always suffered from a sense of isolation, was very stimulating too. Some time had passed since I had been told that I would have to leave, nevertheless I tried to make the best of the summer without worrying too much.



S'Archittu, my *buen retiro*.

(Photo by Maria Franca Marongiu)

In mid-August the international jazz festival organised by my friend Paolo Fresu was about to take place in Berchidda, his town of origin, in Gallura, in the north-eastern part of Sardinia. I didn't want to miss it, so at the last moment I decided to go there even though I was on my own. I found a room in a house with the members of the rock band of the heavily tattooed Joe Perrino (a well-known rocker from Cagliari in the eighties and nineties), and told them about my upcoming assignment, finding them very keen listeners. I preferred not to talk about Kosovo to anyone, both for discretion and also because I cherish absolute silence concerning both the saddest and the happiest events in my life. The flight hadn't been booked yet, so I didn't want to talk about something so important when I wasn't absolutely sure that it would really happen, also to ward off ill luck!

My sister Annalisa had lent me her mobile phone — mobiles weren't so widespread in those years — so I wouldn't be cut off from the rest of the world, and the MAE could contact me. Never has a mobile phone been more useful! I received an unexpected phone call from Hamburg, from the United Nations, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August. I was asked to take up a post within the administration of Kosovo in Pristina, but an immediate answer was required! I was exceptionally granted until the next day to give an answer, so I contacted the MAE, where I was told that the Mission was confirmed but they didn't know exactly when it would be. The thought of working for the United Nations was very tempting, but less than the post as official in the Democratization Department of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo. I was suddenly seized by many doubts, especially because I had to make such an important choice there and then. At any rate, these doubts were soon cleared up because I knew that the initial assignment as official in the Democratization Department would last six months, after which I could return to Italy. After all, I hadn't been sentenced to life imprisonment! If for any reason I realised it was not for me



I could always leave the Mission. Anyway, *carpe diem!* I had to grab the opportunity I was offered.

In any case I enjoyed the jazz festival. The theme was related to the mythological figure of the Argonauts and their adventurous voyage aboard the ship Argo, a mythological image that well represented the transition from old to new. My mind lingered on the similarities with my situation: I felt like an Argonaut of the new millennium. The time had come to go back to S'Archittu, where I still had many things to consider... and many long swims ahead of me, as swimming was another passion of mine. One of the most important reflections concerned my mother, whose health had worsened. I spoke about her on many occasions with my Aunt Lisetta, my mother's sister: a true Catholic, also very open-minded, who I poured my heart out to. Aunt Lisetta listened to me carefully and then said: «you must do what you believe in, live your own life.» Talking with Aunt Lisetta was of great comfort to me; she, who had been a point of reference for me since I was a child, said exactly what I wanted to hear, and I was also convinced that wherever I happened to be, my love would be felt even if I had gone far away to do what I believed in.

And finally September came. I decided not to accept any teaching positions and stayed on in S'Archittu. Since I had completed my revision of English and studied the situation in Kosovo thoroughly, I spent my time swimming, as I had always loved swimming out to sea, in deep water and, why not, solo. But the prelude to the other big change in 1999 was just round the bend...

As I was swimming towards the open sea one day, under the rock arch that gives this popular sea resort its name, I realised that my left arm wasn't moving as it should. I wasn't too worried at first; I simply thought it was a passing disorder so, notwithstanding the impairment, I carried on swimming for the few weeks that I remained in S'Archittu. Things became more worrying when I decided to go to

Valencia in late September to see Eva, a girl I had been in love with for many years.

There were no low cost airlines then, but I found a relatively cheap way to get to Valencia: first by car and train from S'Archittu to Cagliari, then flying with Alitalia to Rome and then with Kuwait Airlines on the last part of a Kuwait-Barcelona flight with transit in Rome Fiumicino. The Rome-Barcelona flight alone came to 150,000 Italian Lire for a one-way ticket! The trip included an overnight stay in Rome, so I asked my sister and her boyfriend, Emanuele, if they could put me up for the night and they were pleased to do so. But from the first evening, as I arrived in Rome, I felt quite poorly, with a terrible feeling of sickness, dizziness and great weakness that, as I was later to learn, is called *asthenia*. Although all three of us were concerned, we thought that the reasons for this malaise could be put down to air travel and that I would feel better the following morning. But in fact that night I slept very badly and the next morning I felt worse, to the point that Annalisa and Emanuele said that it might be wiser not to go to Spain and to postpone the trip. They also called their doctor and got an urgent appointment for me. The doctor reassured me, as he didn't find anything alarming, and told me to take paracetamol; he was sure that the symptoms would soon disappear.

I certainly didn't want to cancel the trip, it had been years since I had last seen Eva; if I didn't go then, when would I be able to go, considering that the Mission was soon to start? So I went to Fiumicino, knowing that, if need be, I could return from Spain beforehand if I was still unwell, although I never seriously thought that would be the case... However, when I arrived in Barcelona I realised that it would be almost impossible for me to catch the train to Valencia. I felt terribly sick and could hardly walk. So I went to the nearest hotel and tried to rest hoping that, with a bit of luck, I could go to Valencia the next day. But it was already late afternoon and I needed to eat something. I phoned the reception desk to ask if the restaurant was

open; I was so worn out that I didn't have the energy to go out and look for a restaurant, even nearby. They told me that their restaurant was closed, so all I could do was go to bed on an empty stomach, hoping to eat something the following morning before getting on the train to Valencia.

But I had a sleepless night, I couldn't stay in bed because every time I lay down I felt a strong urge to vomit, so I dragged myself out of the bedroom, where the hotel staff had placed a chair for me, but I didn't sleep there either. At the break of dawn, I somehow reached the ground floor and I went to a bar next to the restaurant to have breakfast, I sat down, partly hiding my face, and ordered *café con leche y un curasan* (*café au lait* and a croissant). I must have looked terrible, since the bartender asked me to leave because I scared customers off. So I paid and left without even having breakfast, I was exasperated and I raised my voice to tell him that I felt sick. In fact, I must admit that I looked like a *drogatillo* (drug addict) or a *borracho* (drunk). When the waiter had served me I had slumped down over the mug and I had spilled the little milk I had tried to drink all over my clothes... There was nothing else I could do but fly back to Italy as soon as possible; I was very worried, I felt awful and I wasn't sure that that was the end of it. So I left the bar, I asked a passer-by to call a taxi for me and I sat down on a chair outside the bar, waiting in the square. When I finally reached the airport I bought a plane ticket and flew to Rome a few hours later. As soon as I arrived in Rome I bought a ticket to Cagliari, where I landed that same evening. I told Eva that the Ministry had called me and that I had to leave immediately, and therefore I had been forced to put off my trip to Spain. From then on, I wouldn't have been completely honest for quite a long time, mainly for professional reasons. When I arrived in Cagliari I thought it best not to go back to my *buen retiro*, both because the Mission was sure to start soon and, what is more, because I had to figure out what might be the reason for my

mysterious illness that had started in S'Archittu, went on in Rome and got even worse in Barcelona.

My doctor advised me first of all to go to an ear-nose-throat (ENT) specialist he knew, who examined me after only a few days; a couple of days later he told me that I might (!) be suffering from an inflammatory disorder of the inner ear (labyrinthitis), which would go if I took Valium for a week. After a week, not only was my physical exhaustion and frequent nausea not cured, but I could hardly pronounce certain words, although I formed them properly in my head; I later learned that such disorder is called aphasia. At that point, my doctor mentioned that in Sardinia multiple sclerosis — a neurological disease — was widespread, that a check-up was advisable and that the only way to diagnose any neurological disease was to have a neurological examination and a Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR). But time was ticking by, I was to leave in two weeks' time and it wouldn't be easy to get a diagnosis in such a short time.

In those same days I also received the phone call that I had been waiting for: I was supposed to leave for Vienna, where the headquarters of the OSCE Secretariat are based, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October and a few days later for Pristina. It was therefore essential to finish getting everything ready for my departure, in addition to booking the neurological check-up and the NMR. First of all, I had to find a hospital as quickly as possible where I could have the check-up and the NMR scan. My efforts were not in vain as I managed to book the neurological exam for 18 October in one of the main hospitals of Cagliari. In the meantime, I would focus on the red tape required by the OSCE and the MAE, and on packing the things I would need in Kosovo to live in reasonable comfort... there were so many things to do! I concentrated on the priorities, thinking about what was really necessary for my departure. It was essential to have some blood tests and vaccinations, like the one against typhoid, although there were no particular infectious diseases in Kosovo. I would obviously have

to read the informative notes sent by the OSCE and the MAE, and above all pack my suitcases for a long stay of at least a few months in a comfortless country that had just come out of a terrible conflict and where a cold winter was on its way. Time flew by and the day of my medical examination came, when I was told that an NMR brain scan with contrast liquid was necessary. I booked an NMR scan in the same hospital two days later and I was told that the medical report would be ready on the day before my departure. It wasn't pleasant to think about the possible consequences if I were to be diagnosed with a neurological disease, but I immediately tried to look on the bright side: I was in for a penny, in for a pound!

Finally, on the afternoon of the 25<sup>th</sup>, when I had almost finished packing my luggage and my mind was already on what documents I needed to take with me to Vienna and Pristina, I took two hours off to go to the hospital. To my surprise, the doctor that had examined me was waiting with the medical report and the images of my NMR scan.

«There's no doubt: it is multiple sclerosis...»

«But... what can I do now?»

«Just take a Tegretol pill every evening for the time being and I'll see you in a few months for a check-up.»

Even today, I don't hold that doctor in high regard... he didn't seem too bright since, when I said: «I'm due to leave for Kosovo tomorrow for a long period, what do you think?» he answered with a forced smile: «if you really have to...»

He did not consider for one moment how a person who finds out that he has such a frightening incurable disease could be affected by such news and the importance of a person's psychological well-being in such a delicate situation.

I have always been firmly convinced that pursuing one's own desires is crucial in order to make the most of life, despite the difficulties that one might have to face. In fact, these very difficulties, once they are overcome, can be a source of pride. I was quite distressed for the

rest of the evening and into the early hours. Even though I knew very little about MS, its name alone evoked sad visions of wheelchairs and progressive invalidity. However, I also found out that sometimes, after the initial diagnosis has been made, health doesn't necessarily change for the worse. So, the best thing to do was simply to take things as they came, and what I had to do that night was to try and rest so as to be ready to leave for Vienna the following morning.

In any case, 1999, the year of big changes in my life, was drawing to a close with the second major change: I was leaving behind my life as a maths and physics teacher to start a new one with the international peace Missions and, although I wasn't seeking companionship, I had stumbled upon MS — possibly a partner for life.

## Chapter 2

# Vienna and the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, OMiK

I got up very early on 26 October. Luckily, my health had improved over the last seven to ten days and I felt much better now, but I hadn't slept the night before and I was very tired. Nevertheless, I felt the urge to finish packing my suitcases and go to Elmas airport (Cagliari), fly to Fiumicino and on to Vienna. I went to the airport alone, by bus; I had said good-bye to Giulia the previous afternoon, when she had accompanied me to the hospital to get the medical report. Our relationship had been quite troubled lately and we would have split up soon in any case, so the Mission in Kosovo came at the «right time». Giulia was convinced that I was breaking up with her but we didn't see eye-to-eye on this: I was convinced that our relationship was on the rocks because of her. A long stay abroad was what was needed to end our relationship that, notwithstanding the initial love, had given us lots of headaches, especially lately.

I was alone during the journey and I soon realised that I was the only person from Sardinia to take part in international political Missions like the one ahead of me in Kosovo. Only when I arrived at

the hotel where the training course for the OMiK departing officers was to take place did I find out that, among these and including myself, there were only three Italians.

The OSCE trainers encouraged us to socialise from the very start, asking us to introduce ourselves, and this contributed to creating a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. I managed to relax a little too, despite the blow of the previous afternoon, and that same evening I went for a walk in the city centre with some of the other participants. The course was very interesting and in a few days it gave us an insight into the difficult reality of Kosovo.

We flew to Pristina on a special Vienna-Pristina OSCE flight and I soon realised that the airport, which had just been reopened after the conflict — though not yet to commercial flights — was incredibly small: there was only one runway both for incoming and outgoing flights and passengers had to walk on the runway, among military aircraft and helicopters and no end of soldiers from different countries marching about everywhere. A bus picked us up at the airport and took us to the transit house, where newcomers could stay until they found more permanent lodgings, either with the help of acquaintances or through the OMiK Office responsible for finding accommodation for international officers. I lived in the transit house with five other people during the first period. We often had breakfast and dinner together but, unfortunately, there was an Italian among them who I could barely stand.

So I did all I could to find alternative accommodation as quickly as possible. Eventually, I moved into the flat of Sandra, a Bosnian Kosovar. My flatmates were Alienor, who was French, Irmeli, an ethnic Sami Finn (ethnic Samis are indigenous people of the Finnish Arctic Circle), Carlo and Fabio, respectively from Veneto and Sicily, who had flown over from Italy with me. The move and the hope of having found good accommodation and good company were short-lived. Barely a month had gone by when I had



to start my search all over again: the landlord needed the flat for himself and, to tell the truth, I had never got on too well with Fabio and Carlo, whose values and ideals were too different from mine, although we didn't have a really bad relationship, whilst I did have a good relationship with Irmeli and Alienor. Anyway, our house was quite far from the OMiK Headquarters (HQ): a 25-minute walk, which I found rather tiring in the morning, even though it was good exercise.

I needed an apartment where I could have more space for myself. Moreover, I wanted to live closer to the OMiK building and to the heart of the city and its historic centre. In those days I also became familiar with the OMiK headquarters, including my Department and all the others on the nine floors of the building. The first impression of the headquarters was very strange for us newcomers: there were some mysterious sandbags right next to the entrance, and we were puzzled by their purpose: we couldn't make head nor tail of what they were doing there. The initial embarrassment was soon overcome by curiosity; we asked someone more experienced than us to explain what these sandbags were for: we were told that visitors emptied the barrel of their weapons there. So that was why they were so full of holes and why we often heard shots!

I did, already, know that I would be working at the Mission headquarters, which I found exciting. I had known all along that I would work where the decisions concerning the social, democratic and political progress of Kosovo were made, but I still didn't know exactly what my job would be! From the very first day I worked in what was to be my office for the rest of the Mission, at first sharing a desk and computer with Cristina, an energetic economist from Trento and also a helicopter pilot both for passion and work. Cristina and I shared the only office of the Civil Administration Support Division with Bjørg, a Norwegian and former official for the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo that lasted from October 1998

to March 1999, set up by the UN Security Council with the aim to ensure that the parties at war observed the signed agreements). During the first period, Cristina and I didn't have a Chief of Division and so we worked with Bjørg, under her supervision; we travelled far and wide in Kosovo to look into the needs of the different administrations, provinces and municipalities. When I was in Pristina I was always popping into all the offices on the nine floors of the Headquarters, spurred on by the desire to learn and also out of... sheer curiosity. There was no end to what I learned!

The headquarters of the Mission, the largest to have taken place up until then (in terms of its widespread territorial presence and the number of officers), had been conceived so as to ensure its operational capacity regardless of what state the country was in, as if it were an independent city. On the ground floor, to the right of the entrance there was the Movements Office, where everybody went when they needed a Mission car or to reserve a seat on a bus to go, for example, to the airport in Skopje (in FYROM, more commonly called Macedonia, not to be confused with Greek Macedonia), the only international airport in the area operating civilian flights, from which international officers flew to their holiday destinations or simply flew back to their countries of origin.

Just opposite the Movements Office there was the Security Office, in charge of the security of the Mission, which had to be contacted for any matter not falling within the ordinary, such as all requests to visit the areas inhabited by Serbian Kosovars (especially if in the north of Kosovo). When you went there you had to travel around by armoured car, keeping a constant radio contact with the radio office of the headquarters and with the intended destination. In such cases the ETD (Estimated Time of Departure) and ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival) had to be communicated as well as all the stops along the way, so that the staff in charge could keep updated on our movements both in Pristina and at the final destination.

Mitrovica Rahova is the main town in the homonymous district in northern Kosovo and one of the main centres in the territory. It is considered to be the capital of the northern region with a Serbian majority and all Serbian institutions in Kosovo, which are recognised by the Belgrade government but not by the secessionist Kosovo government, are based there. Moreover, the city has two administrations: Serbian in the northern part and Albanian in the southern part. During the last stages of the conflict Mitrovica had become the centre of violent ethnic clashes and it had become necessary to monitor the bridge connecting the northern and southern parts. The first time I went to the most notorious area of Kosovo — north Mitrovica — was a particularly interesting experience for me because I put into practice for the first time two things that I had learned in the specific training courses: I used the radio and I drove an armoured car. Communicating by radio entails using a specific language that can be interpreted unambiguously and, above all, must be brief and to the point.

My colleagues pulled my leg when I arrived at the regional office in south Mitrovica (forced stop when heading towards north Mitrovica), because on my way there I had said over the radio something like: «LE25 (Lima Echo twenty-five, my code name used for radio communications) calling, how are you? I'm arriving after a very enjoyable trip».

The correct phrase should have been simply: «LE25 calling» and then, after their reply: «LE25 arriving, ETA 20 minutes».

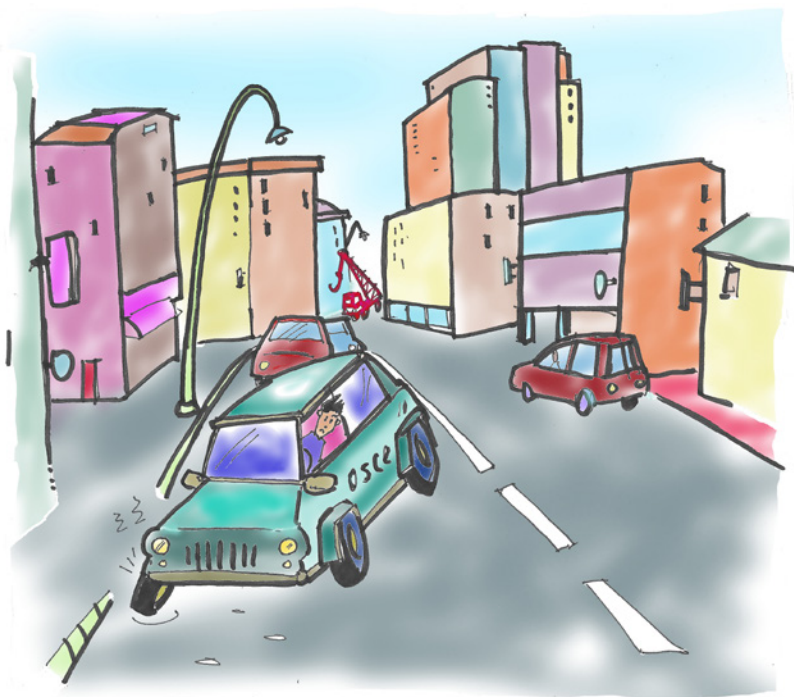
My first impression of the new driving experience was quite worrying as I became aware of what it was like: driving a car that weighs more than four tons means being extremely careful during changes in gradient, especially downhill, since it takes much longer to brake than in a non-armoured car. You could easily panic: «when the hell is this juggernaut going to stop?» It was easier when you drove along familiar roads, as you knew where the downhill stretches were, so you could slow down and brake well in advance.

One day, as I was driving an armoured jeep along a street in Pristina not far from the Headquarters, a wheel got stuck in a hole and I was forced to call, via radio, the Movements Office, which sent a pick-up truck to pull the jeep out. Alas, with the pick-up came the person in charge, who gave me a good telling off there and then: «what are you doing there in that fucking hole?»

Going back to the exploration of the headquarters, to the left of the entrance on the ground floor there was the Medical Office, where you could see a doctor and you could get basic medicines for free, whereas the others needed to be prescribed, and you could buy them cheaply in a chemist's near the headquarters. Next to the Medical Office worked the masseuse. Her name was Biserka («pearl» in Serbian) Ivanovic, a Serbian girl who had two badges, one with her real name on it, which she wore when she was inside the HQ, and another one with Gudrun Ivansdottir on it (the latter being the Icelandic surname for «Ivan's daughter», which is the meaning of Ivanovic in Serbian). For safety reasons, when Biserka left the headquarters she always wore the Icelandic badge and spoke only in English (trying to conceal her Serbian accent), as there had been many cases of Serbs and Kosovar Serbs killed or injured in Pristina. The case of a Bulgarian who was seriously injured while he was walking near the HQ speaking his own language (Bulgarian is very similar to Serbian) caused a sensation. Biserka and I became friends, sometimes we went out together and she often gave me priority when I booked massage treatments, or didn't even want me to pay (at the OMiK, massages cost 10 German marks, the currency used in the Mission, per session).

The last place I visited on the ground floor was the Post Office, where you went when you wanted to send a letter or a parcel, or when you needed information about something that had been sent to you. The postal service had to go through Vienna: all mail was sent to the OSCE Secretariat, where it was sorted and sent

out to all destinations. Sending mail was not at all easy: Austrian postage had to be used, which had to be sent to us from Vienna; after all, it was as if outbound mail was sent from Vienna... The postage was seldom available and you had no choice but to wait for the incoming OSCE flight from Vienna carrying mail and postage. In any case, the correspondence wasn't always dispatched the morning after you had taken your outbound mail to the post office, since the flight to Vienna left only every other day. They got to know me well at the post office just a few days after my arrival because I often went to inquire about packages and letters sent by my father or friends.



Our hero about to get a well-deserved telling off!

*(drawing by Paolo Marongiu)*

I would also like to mention the Training Section, which could be accessed through a side entrance of the building, as I often went there for two main reasons: in the first place because I was a trainer, so I needed to go there for any help I might need concerning the courses which I was initially engaged in, both as an organiser and as a trainer; and in the second place because I often applied for new courses that interested me personally.

The first floor was entirely occupied by the Administrative Section of the Mission. To the right were the financial offices, where you went if you needed money, or to check whether the terms of the contract for the consultant you had proposed were well defined. I became familiar with this Section over a rather long period, in particular when I was in charge of organising the course on inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation, for which well-known consultants were recruited. On that occasion I had the honour to invite to Pristina two of the leading experts on Peace theories, which I had studied thoroughly: Alberto L'Abate and Johan Galtung (by kind invitation of his cousin Bjørg).

The Officials' Administration was on the left, where Graziella, a blond angel always eager to give guidance on the terms of your contract and tell you if you could go on leave — especially if you had already talked this matter over with the Head of your Division. Having Graziella as a friend meant having an ace up your sleeve!

Skipping the second and third floor, where I seldom went and which I wasn't interested in, on the fourth floor there was a large meeting room that could accommodate hundreds of people; conferences and courses, but — most importantly — the morning briefings were held there. The OMiK officers were formally required to attend those illustrating the updated situation in Kosovo, as well as a run-down on the main activities of the Mission and of the United Nations. The briefings also covered world news, focussing in particular on what people from all over the world thought of the situation in Kosovo;

during the first year of the Mission the morning briefs were held on a daily basis and were very popular.

The fifth floor was dedicated to the protection of Human Rights. I went there often, owing to my frequent contact with Greg, an American trainer of Slovak origin, whose courses I sometimes attended and who I often met to discuss possible points of connection between conflict resolution (which I dealt with for some time) and human rights.

Sonsoles, a Spanish Andalusian flamenco dancer, and I had become close friends. I came up with the idea of organising dancing classes; she would be the flamenco teacher. I didn't get around to organising the flamenco course due to logistical difficulties, but I inquired about a tango course that was about to start and I thought that we could set up a dance school which taught the most popular dances, including ballroom dancing, Latin American dances (samba, salsa, etc.), mazurka, tango and flamenco. The project had been ambitious, but in the end only the tango class materialised, which I attended for a while even though it wasn't my favourite dance, because the teacher (a Ukrainian who worked for the United Nations) was a clever and likeable man and the atmosphere was great.

The OMiK headquarters were very close to the UN building and to the main street, where various non-governmental organisations had their offices. The UN Administration headquarters (Kosovo was governed by the United Nations for a long time) were only two hundred metres away from the OMiK headquarters, whilst the OMiK regional offices were in a building next to the HQ. There were places downtown where it was possible to relax and find some entertainment.

After the bombings were over, several restaurants advertising Italian cuisine were opened in a short time; the must-haves included pasta with broccoli and *lasagne*. Moreover, very close to the HQ stood the UN building with many offices, which had a large gym with fitness equipment below street level, where the members of the

international organisations were free to practice sports or participate in various courses. Just across the road from the UN building was the «Cappuccino», a bar owned by Italians that had popped up overnight. The best coffee and cappuccino in the city were served there; people could meet up at the end of their working day or during their lunch break for a coffee or a cappuccino and a chat with international colleagues. The word «international» was customary and was commonly used to distinguish the colleagues sent by the 55 Member States of the OSCE from the local colleagues (ethnic Serb or Albanian Kosovars who remained simply as assistants to the «international» colleagues for many years). Some «institutions», such as the Cappuccino, for instance, were frequented only by international personnel.

I have always disapproved of this sort of discrimination and I always tried to go where «native» Kosovars went to eat and drink local specialities, paying far less, by the way, than in the bars and restaurants that had sprung up almost solely for international officers. Wherever I went I always tried to integrate as much as possible with the local population. I didn't know how long I would be staying in Kosovo, so it was important for me to get used to the objectively difficult conditions that characterised life in those places. So, I tried to make the best of what I found, striving to consider pleasant certain things that maybe, at first glance, didn't strike me as such. I have always valued living in a comfortable environment, so I needed to make a great effort to make Pristina a welcoming place to live. Pristina was an ugly town. Unlike all beautiful towns, no river ran through it, it was cold, full of puddles and the streets froze over during the winter; it was hot and terribly dusty during the summer.

I found a new home thanks to the accommodation office. It was close to the HQ, a bit smaller than the previous one but only one person who worked in the OMiK Elections Department lived there. I asked Carlo and Fabio about this person, as they worked in the same Department as him. They told me that my possible future



flatmate was a Russian called Zenonas and that he was a bit strange and taciturn, but not a bad sort.

My life in Pristina began with many concerns that would seize me at various points throughout the day, triggered by any task that might require an extraordinary effort. «Will I manage?» was my recurring innermost question since I landed in Pristina. Apparently, I had started this new chapter by infringing one of the first requirements of international Missions: to be in good health, so as not to represent the slightest impediment not only to yourself but also to your colleagues for the successful outcome of the Mission. But I was fine! I had recovered completely and, although I kept worrying about everything, I felt I was up to carrying out, and I wanted to carry out, any task the Mission would give me and whatever activity I considered of interest or of help to Kosovar society.

I always reflected upon the fact that my involvement in a particular activity might somehow be detrimental for my colleagues or for the Mission, since I feared that a crisis could be suddenly and unexpectedly triggered off. On the other hand, I knew that if need be I could keep any health problem under control and that the Mission had to be ready for anything, even a possible quick evacuation. Little by little, my confidence started to return and I was becoming aware that I could deal with and overcome any adversity, such as the difficulty of adapting to new life companions, or the cold and hostile winter that had marked our arrival. It started to snow a lot from as early as the beginning of November and at first I was amused, almost pleased: it wasn't a common site for me, as I came from Sardinia and in particular from the Campidano plane.

Pristina was somewhat charming with its mosque and its historic centre all covered in snow; it seemed almost beautiful... But temperatures remained very low until late February: they reached minus 23 in Pristina (and minus 27 in Prizren, in the south of Kosovo) and there were often blackouts that lasted the whole day so you were forced to

stay at home in the freezing cold and with no hot water. It was bitterly cold, as the only functioning power plant that guaranteed at least some electricity for all of Kosovo was insufficient for this purpose. Therefore, during the few hours when it actually worked it served only a part of Pristina. During the coldest period, when temperatures dropped to twenty degrees below zero, it wasn't much above zero indoors and the only thing I could do was to sleep with four double blankets and a woollen hat. I was no longer cold, but I could hardly breathe! Obviously, there was no hot water so I learned to shave with cold water. I had a freezing cold shower only once, which gave me a terrible headache, so I asked Cristina (who lived just across the road from the HQ and whose house always had electricity, heating and hot water thanks to the generator of the HQ) if I could take a shower at her house and, to my great relief, she said that would be no problem.

I also learned to walk reasonably well on ice; I never slipped over. Well, hardly ever... Every Sunday evening I went to mass and on one of those evenings, although it was hardly snowing, I noticed that the snow of the previous days had frozen. I had walked all the way from the HQ to the only Catholic church in town, managing miraculously to keep my balance, pirouetting acrobatically every five steps, but when I was just outside the church, feeling relieved after my narrow escape, I slipped and fell heavily, just as the classic «Bloody hell!» slipped out.

I stole a furtive glance to see if anyone had witnessed my fall, but the mass had already started and fortunately there was no one around. Pleased about this, I stepped inside and, as every good church-goer does, I took my hat off. It wasn't long before I realised there was something strange: unlike myself, everyone had their coats and hats on; in that cold, at a temperature of twenty degrees below zero outside, inside the church the temperature must have barely been above zero... I clenched my teeth and put my hat back on immediately, conforming to the local custom. I had just learned something new, which, in fact, was a forgivable lack of respect!

That winter Pristina, like most of Kosovo, was really bleak. When it wasn't snowing, the snow froze into thick icy sheets, then, when the temperature rose, it started raining and muddy puddles were simply everywhere. Walking meant getting really wet and muddy, but even travelling by car meant dirtying the car and its passengers, as they obviously had to get out sooner or later and couldn't always avoid the puddles.

The hardest thing for me was not being able to talk to anyone about my health, which was always at the back of my mind. After a few days on the Mission I felt the need to rid myself of that burdensome secret, so I decided to confide in Cristina who I couldn't exactly call a close friend, but who was my closest working partner as we worked side-by-side day in and day out. I felt relieved afterwards, although I would always have to carry this «weight» throughout the Mission and for the rest of my life. Later I spoke about my situation to Waldemar, the Polish Reporting Officer of my own Department and my dearest friend in Kosovo for a very long time, who asked me if I had spoken about it to anybody else. He wasn't taken in when I said «no», since he asked: «and what about Cristina?»

He wanted to warn me: speaking about it within the Mission could be very risky both with respect to my work and to possible Missions in the future, so I had to be very cautious. I have always been very naive and I hadn't yet realised that my dear Cristina wasn't a saint but an ambitious person without too many scruples: not the person you would want to share your secrets with. For a long time I worried and regretted being so superficial, therefore I became very wary, considering the possible consequences. Anyway, I tried to take care of my physical well-being and of my spirituality. I went to the UN gym at least twice a week and tried to meditate thanks to what I had learned in Cagliari from Father Piras, although I wasn't very methodical. Father Francesco Piras passed away in January 2014 at the age of 99, after devoting many years in Sardinia to teaching transcendental meditation and how praying can benefit from meditation.

The New Year brought about many changes from the very start. Although the workload increased, I dedicated all the time I could to my many activities. During the Christmas holidays I returned to Sardinia because I wanted to see my old friends in Oristano, but above all because I had to have a very important medical examination in Cagliari: a lumbar puncture for the analysis of the spinal fluid — the liquid in the spinal bone marrow. I was admitted to the old hospital *San Giovanni di Dio*. I didn't expect the examination to be so painful and I was forced to stay in bed, in hospital, with severe back-ache, from 27 December to 6 January. Never has a New Year's Eve been sadder, notwithstanding the nurses' kind support and their attempts to get me get out of bed. The initial diagnosis was confirmed: multiple sclerosis it was. What should I do now? This further blow made me lose heart, but I was eager to go back to Kosovo, where I had left a wonderful job and where many good colleagues and some great friends were waiting for me. I made only one phone call saying that, owing to important family commitments, I was forced to fly back a few days later, so I got ready to return to what had become my new home.

When I had left Pristina before Christmas, ethnic Serbian Kosovars still lived in the town centre and you could still use the Yugoslav dinar to buy food and other necessities in the small shops: although it was very devalued, it was still the legal currency. When I got back to Kosovo I was bitterly disappointed by the changes that had taken place while I was away: close to the HQ and even closer to what was to become my new home, I realised that the KFOR (the Kosovo protection force led by NATO and set up under the agreements with the United Nations) soldiers were gone. They had monitored the safety and the tranquillity of the few Serb families who had lived there for many years after being forced to leave their homes and who now lived as near-hostages. Only German Marks were accepted now. The «Albanisation» of Kosovo and Pristina was more evident, and now the 500 Serbian-Kosovars lived in a ghetto-district in Pristina,

well away from the town centre, under constant surveillance of the UN military. This replacement of the Dinar with the German Mark was emblematic of the unmistakable determination to break free from Serbia and of the increasing internationalisation, since the German Mark was the strongest currency in Europe and the most used by the wide international community in Kosovo, even though US dollars were often accepted due to the large group of Americans based there. As far as I was concerned, the fact that I suffered from complex disorders which would progress in an unpredictable manner and which were regarded as serious, paradoxically allowed me to feel free to put everything I had into my job: I had nothing to lose and I could devote myself body and soul to the job I loved so much.

### **Life with Zenonas**

Just before leaving for my Christmas holidays I had made arrangements to move in with Zenonas and I realised straight away that he was, indeed, rather strange. He was very taciturn and he lived in a world of his own, with no friends, and it was almost impossible to have a conversation with him, as I couldn't find any topic that raised his interest. My first attempt at making friends with him got off on the wrong foot. I had heard him speaking in Russian with Russian colleagues in the HQ once, so I thought it only natural to say: «you're Russian, aren't you?»

I certainly regretted saying that! He was furious, he raised his voice and he hit the roof. So I learned a lesson: never mistake a Lithuanian for a Russian, since Lithuania had been oppressed by Russia for a long time. I often happened to hear him talk nonsense and utter incomprehensible sentences and this worried me more often than not. I wondered if I would be affected by living with someone so... crazy. But I realised that, despite everything, I could establish a good

relationship with him; besides, his house was very close to the HQ and this was an invaluable plus.

However, something alarming happened one evening when I came home from work: I noticed that someone had been picking the lock of our front door, but they hadn't had time to break in because they had heard me coming. The Security personnel came immediately and were seriously worried since the attempted burglary had taken place so close to the OMiK HQ.

In the meantime, I consolidated my friendship with Waldemar and Anna — she was Polish like him, and very nice. We formed a good trio and we often spent weekends together. Since my house was so close to the HQ, Waldemar and Anna often popped round to see me and have a dish of pasta or a coffee. Waldemar found Zenonas amusing and always hoped to find him at home. In time I became known (especially by Waldemar and Anna) for my cooking skills, thanks to my spaghetti with sauce or carbonara. Indeed, I enjoyed cooking because it represented another way of maintaining a link with my homeland. Sport gave us another opportunity to spend some time together out of doors. Like most Lithuanians, Zenonas' idol was the great basketball player Arvidas Sabonis (long appreciated in the NBA, he was later appointed Minister for Sport in Lithuania). So we often went to play basketball in the UN gym or in a municipal gym with an outdoor space where we could also run and jog. We often played ping-pong in the UN gym, or chess, at home. I usually won at ping-pong, while he always won at chess and basketball.

## **The New Year in Kosovo**

With the New Year everything changed at work: in January Wolfgang, our Head of Division, arrived. He took to me although I

didn't speak German — my only flaw. Wolfgang was the typical German: a real perfectionist and very resourceful, too; he often spoke to me in German when he was intent on his huge workload but I couldn't understand a word of it (apart from a word here and there). Once, after a long speech, realising that I hadn't understood a word of what he had just said, he repeated it all over again, but in German again! After Wolfgang's arrival, our trips, aimed at a better understanding of how the public administration worked, became more frequent, and sometimes we had to go back to the same places we had previously visited with Bjørg and Cristina. The latter, however, left the Mission at the end of the first semester.

Weather permitting, we went on Sunday outings during the spring. There are many beautiful areas in Kosovo, with wild mountains and breath-taking waterfalls. On one of our first trips we went to the mountains of Brod, in the province of Prizren, in the south of Kosovo. We had heard that you could go horse riding so we looked for a guide who had five horses for us, but I was worried since I was the only one who had never even been on a horse!

We found some improvised guides who had big workhorses that were not exactly what you would call beautiful but that knew where to tread along those dangerous tracks and this was just what we needed. I thought it wiser to tell the guides about my inexperience and they thoughtfully gave me the most docile horse. When we got on our horses, one of the guides rode by my side, telling me over and over again, partly in Serbo-Croatian (since it was an area inhabited by Bosnians) and partly in English (learned so as to speak with foreigners), not to worry. The horses walked along narrow paths on the edge of a cliff, and I guess anybody could see how frightened I was of plunging down hundreds of metres, but my guide invariably repeated: «Don't worry, he knows what he's doing.» Waldemar came on that trip too; at a certain point we stopped for a break, I dismounted and to my horror I watched as my horse trod on my foot... Waldemar laughed

his head off when I uttered in dismay: «could you please get off my foot?» Everyone found this hilarious!

We stopped to have lunch in a barn where two of our guides, Boris and Ivan, had already placed some mattresses so that we could rest after our meal. We ate out in the open, by the barbecue, where they roasted some meat that we washed down with their strong red wine. My poor balance and weak legs, which I tried to mask by saying I was not very good at riding, were more evident when I mounted, therefore I always had to ask somebody to help me get on my horse. That very day my reputation as a clumsy person, which I had revealed on purpose, increased considerably, but I achieved another success, which was important for me: I had ridden along steep narrow paths...

Waldemar, Anna and I also spent a weekend together on Lake Ohrid, in FYROM, where we enjoyed the beautiful countryside and had a great time. We rented a house for the weekend and sailed on the lake (Waldemar was good at sailing). But the funniest thing happened in the evening, when we sat down for our meal in a restaurant near the house we had rented. As we were sitting down at the table we turned to a person who was wearing a white shirt and looked like a waiter. Waldemar was our spokesman because he seemed to be able to speak Serbian, the language commonly used in FYROM (but, as he later confessed, he was mixing the two Slavic languages he knew, Polish and Russian: «I didn't really know what I was talking about!»). After Waldemar had finished his long speech to the attentive but embarrassed «waiter», the latter said something in his own language that sounded like: «but I'm not the waiter!» causing the three of us to roar with laughter.

My concerns came later, when we went home and I realised that of the three bedrooms, two were upstairs and one was downstairs, near the bathroom (the only one in the house). We briefly discussed who would sleep downstairs and who would sleep upstairs, but Anna was



the first to say «I'd rather sleep downstairs because I get up at least once during the night to go to the toilet.»

This worried me because I had always been used to getting up several times during the night to go to the toilet, and with MS my bladder was even weaker; in addition, there was a steep staircase from the ground floor to the first floor. However, I preferred not to say anything and I chivalrously let Anna have the downstairs bedroom. Everything went smoothly and this reinforced my conviction that, when you do something you believe in, you find unexpected strength to overcome any difficulty.

We thought that Wolfgang would define the targets of our Division clearly, considering that before his arrival we had proceeded only by identifying the needs of the various administrations without pursuing clear objectives, as we were convinced that the priority was to identify such needs. The first thing that Wolfgang did with our help was to establish the fundamental needs of a modern public administration, appointing Bjørg as «Chief of Policy». To tell the truth, we didn't really understand what kind of tasks this assignment with such a «magnificent» name would entail and Bjørg didn't, either, and for this very reason she was rather annoyed. It seemed as if, having replaced Bjørg as Chief of Division, Wolfgang was looking for a way to appease her by giving her a vague but formally «important» assignment. He still had to decide what assignment to give me (the Division was still very small, but the personnel would increase in the future), so Wolfgang suggested we talk it over and invited me to have lunch with him at the restaurant on the ninth floor of the HQ. I was a bit worried, pessimistically wondering what I had done wrong, but in fact, while we were having a cup of coffee in the restaurant (the Democratization Department was on the eighth floor) Wolfgang simply asked for my opinion: he wanted to find out what I really wanted to do since he hadn't yet understood what job I was cut out for. Faced with such a question, the answer to which

would determine my future in the Mission, I strategically tried to gain time and asked him when I could give him a final answer. So we decided to meet again three days later, at the same restaurant. I spent those three days worrying, not knowing exactly what to say to Wolfgang. I still hadn't made my mind up when we met and he asked me what I had decided. Well, time was certainly up and I almost improvised my answer when I said: «I would like to be in charge of the future Computer courses for public administrators for the whole of Kosovo.»

«Very well, it's more than I expected!» he remarked.

I regretted giving him that answer as soon as the words were out of my mouth and for many days I thought, anxiously: «what a fool I've been! I will never be up to it...» It was going to be a very challenging job. At first I would have to deal with the organisation of the courses, which I would also teach, all over Kosovo. I started straight away to get in touch with my colleagues in the field offices (the officers responsible for the support to public administration offices throughout the country), who would have to recruit the trainers for the courses, who I would supervise and provide with the necessary funds from the HQ.

Despite the considerable workload I was very satisfied because I felt that what I was doing was very useful: the public administrators had been left out of the modernisation process, therefore, a computer course was just what they needed. The recognition expressed by the participants for what I did for them and for the way I taught was very rewarding. In my job as a trainer I put my longstanding experience as a teacher to good use and for quite a long time I even considered applying for a job in the Training Department. You could ask to be transferred to another Department during the Mission, provided you had valid reasons (subject to the vacancies in the intended Department). Nevertheless, in the end I decided to stay put in my Division, because I got on well with my colleagues and I felt that there I would

be given the opportunity to focus on activities which were more consonant with me.

Whereas initially I was awe-struck by my colleagues' impressive experience and by their grandiose CVs — many of whom had important international backgrounds or equally important experiences within the public administration (like Bjørg, who had, for years, been the mayor of her hometown and then a Member of the Norwegian Parliament), after a while I realised that I did, after all, have something to contribute. Although I respected my colleagues' experience I had no reason to feel dwarfed by anybody, as long as I was able to put forward well-conceived projects and ideas, which could be approved and carried out together with the colleagues of my Division or with other colleagues, even from Divisions of other Departments.

I have always loved interdisciplinary approaches; this was one of the things I had in common with Wolfgang (who was also a pianist and conductor), who I could therefore propose my projects to, certain that he would appreciate them and promote their development. There were now three of us in the office: Wolfgang, Bjørg and myself, so we thought it appropriate to talk over, on a preliminary basis, what activities our Division should carry out, which would then be discussed with the other colleagues. It was Wolfgang's opinion that one of the fundamental requisites of a public administrator in Kosovo was to be knowledgeable in Conflict Resolution and I totally agreed with him. This was an area which I had already taken a wide interest in when I lived in Italy (and which I became more confident in by attending advanced courses organised by my colleagues in the Training Section). With me as the initial trainer, we set up courses that were subsequently run by external experts.

The Democratization Department was in an excellent location, just below the bar-restaurant, which occupied the entire ninth floor. The bar-restaurant was a great place to have lunch (good international cuisine, especially Italian) or even just a quick coffee break.

It was also a good place to meet friends from other Departments or Missions, or even well-known public figures in Kosovo. Moreover, there was a «happy hour» on Friday evenings, which was a pleasant way of spending a few hours in company (especially with members of various organisations and international NGOs), drinking a pint or so of beer and enjoying some tasty starters.

Pristina was dangerous, you had to move around the city carefully, preferably not on your own, and try to avoid certain areas where there was a higher risk of violence. I crossed the «ghetto» inhabited by ethnic Serb Kosovars (where there were frequent clashes) only once in a Mission car bearing the coat of arms of the OSCE clearly visible and with an ethnic Serb driver, since the ethnic Albanian drivers categorically refused to drive through that area. The fact that I had a serious illness contributed significantly to numbing my sense of fear (I had other things to worry about...) and indeed, I often volunteered for potentially dangerous assignments. I have always been extremely curious and this is another reason I ventured into interesting but risky areas, like the villages near Pristina, which were inhabited by ethnic Serb Kosovars, and North Mitrovica. Besides, the OMiK Mission had the very aim of helping the Kosovars of all ethnic groups, especially the most vulnerable.

After the NATO bombings were over and following the «liberation» of the ethnic Albanian Kosovars, the latter felt almost «entitled» to punish their ethnic Serb fellow countrymen, who thus lived in constant fear and were often forced to live in enclaves, protected by KFOR. I felt closer to the ethnic groups living in Kosovo who were less numerous than the ethnic Albanians because they were more vulnerable and in many cases had an interesting history. I also sympathised with the Serbs because of their culture, which I felt more akin to.

I spent a lot of time on my own when I lived in Kosovo and I often thought of looking for a girlfriend, but I wasn't over-keen on any of the women I knew. On the other hand, I invariably worried

about my health and, at the same time, I started thinking a lot about Francesca, the first girl I had fallen in love with, who had met a tragic death when she was only 19. Apart from going out with Biserka, my masseuse friend, I sometimes went for a walk in the centre of Pristina with my friend Ksenija, from Belgrade. Even though we avoided straying into the more dangerous areas, Ksenija was always afraid and asked me to hold her hand (which I was happy to do since she was quite striking!), because she looked Serbian (tall with a fair complexion) and, although we spoke in English, she couldn't conceal her Serbian accent.

Bomb attacks were still frequent in Pristina, most of which were directed against Serb-Kosovars. Once within a fortnight two explosions took place at night in buildings nearby (one fifty meters to the right and the second a hundred meters to the left of my bedroom window). I usually sleep very soundly at night and even the bombs didn't wake me up; I found out what had happened only the following morning, when I heard the great hustle and bustle from the street below. It was, in any case, not difficult to encounter people who were still very involved in the recent ethnic clashes. The war had just ended and the noise of the bombing and the smell of gunpowder were still in the air. Even in my Division, one assistant was a former member of the KLA (the Kosovo Albanian militia) and he easily took offence.

There wasn't always a relaxed atmosphere among the international colleagues and you had to be very careful about what you said because there were many people who thought almost exclusively about their own career and were ready to take the credit for your work. Furthermore, there were also many secret agents among the OSCE officers — especially from the CIA and the KGB — who used the Mission as a cover (although their double dealing was a mystery to no one). One of the members of our Division was the CIA agent that most of us knew about and his wife was the person who revised the morning briefs, which is why they were considered partial and not

always reliable. Rumour had it that nearly all of the Russian officials were also KGB agents. Everyone agreed that the atmosphere that reigned in Kosovo was undoubtedly the most tense in the world.

Pristina was even more glum because the sky was constantly grey due to the pollution caused by the local coal plant in Obiliq. Because of these harsh living conditions, we spent a lot of time planning holidays abroad (when possible) or simply weekend or Sunday trips. In the New Year I made friends with Valentin, a Bulgarian newcomer, a Democratization Officer in the Division for Support to NGOs and Civil Society. Valentin and I became close friends, and we still are! What is more, I found a valuable confidant and the best of colleagues in him. The work in my Division went on with the targets set, even though Wolfgang's arrival marked a significant increase in the general workload and shortly after the Germans Otto and Klaus, the Swedish Björn and the Americans Dick and Ruth arrived. Unfortunately, Bjørg left and Björn was appointed Chief of Studies. Among the new activities there were also the medium-term courses, which I was in charge of. Not only our activities but also our commitments increased and we decided to open a branch of the Institute for the Public Administration, responsible for our courses, in Ferizaj (a small town near Pristina), where we based our offices and held courses and meetings.

Although the prospects of the Division were very promising, organising the courses for Public Administrators wasn't enough for me, even though I had a good relationship with Wolfgang and we had decided to introduce classes on conflict mediation and Human Rights in the medium-term courses. Just before leaving the Mission Bjørg called her cousin Johan Galtung, considered the world's leading expert on peace theories. Galtung held an intensive course for Public Administrators and a seminar open to the public in the OMiK auditorium. The seminar attracted many members of the OMiK and of other Missions, as well as many Kosovars interested in the subject.

The seminar was a great success and Galtung answered many questions posed by the public afterwards, some of which were extremely to the point. Another external expert I contacted to hold courses on conflict mediation was Alberto L'Abate, who was well known, both in Italy and by Johan Galtung.

### **The training course on inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation in Kosovo**

I had dealt with reconciliation and conflict mediation when I was still in Italy and Alberto and I thought that the OMiK would be the right institution to promote a training course on inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation in Kosovo. The course, conceived by Alberto and his association, Campagna Kosovo, would be open to all ethnic groups. I felt that the time had come to ask Wolfgang to grant me some time to devote to the project that interested me the most. Even though the project might not always be welcomed by the whole population, it was so innovative at a time when the conflict had just come to an end and there were still open wounds. Wolfgang had his doubts, as he knew what a huge workload awaited us in the Division. To convince him, I described the project for what it was — something revolutionary: the first course on inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation in Kosovo organised by an international organisation after the NATO intervention in 1999. Wolfgang told me he needed a little time to think it over before giving an answer.

Two days later his answer came, «All right, you can carry on with your project, but if up until now you have worked 100% for the Division, you will now work 110%: 80% for the Division and 30% for your project». I agreed and thanked him, but once again I had accepted a big commitment and I began to worry... Anyway, I didn't waste time and started thinking of how to develop the pro-

ject and Valentin came to my aid (after all, this project concerned his Division more than mine). So we organised a course aimed at training trainers on *Inter-ethnic Dialogue and Reconciliation* between all ethnic groups, to be selected among those who (in Kosovo, but also in Serbia, FYROM and Montenegro) had been engaged in dialogue and reconciliation even before the war. The course would be delivered by international trainers experienced in conflict resolution and by an expert in Theatre Pedagogy. It was mainly Valentin who saw to the selection of the 16 participants of the first of the three sessions of the course (which took place in Pristina in May-June 2000 on «Nonviolent control and peaceful conflict transformation»). The participants were Albanians, Bosnian-Slav Muslims, Turks, Roma and Gorani selected from among the representatives of local NGOs, students of the University of Pristina and local staff members of the OSCE.

The first session lasted two days, it was held in Albanian and on that occasion we rented a meeting room not far from the OMiK building. Since I was one of the two people responsible for the Mission, I supervised and attended most of the sessions. The lessons were very interesting; some participants kept expressing their scepticism whilst I found the shyness of some young university students (eighteen year-olds) almost touching... It was interesting to see how the participants took part in the role-play; some of them participated actively, while others almost needed pushing. At a certain point, a thirty-five-year-old councillor of a municipality divided between Serbian-Kosovars and Albanians raised his voice and said he thought it was wrong to play about with such terrible things as the oppression and the war they had experienced for so long. All our explanations and attempts to calm him down were in vain: he left the course before the end of the first day and didn't return. All in all, the first session went very well and almost all the participants expressed their strong desire to meet their Serbian counterparts in the third session, as planned.



The second session (held in Serbian and English) took place in Ohrid in September 2000, and the theme was the «Reconstruction of human and social relations after the war and violence». There were 14 participants (Bosnian-Slavs, Serbs, Roma, Gorani) selected from among the representatives of local NGOs, local staff members of the OSCE and activists from Serbia (Belgrade and Pancevo). In my opinion, this second session was the most successful, also thanks to the internal dynamics the participants managed to establish. Small groups of people who already knew each other were soon formed: a group of activists from Belgrade and Pancevo, a group of Serb-Kosovars and a group of OMiK employees. The generally relaxed atmosphere of the second session contributed to the successful outcome of the role-play and interesting analyses of conflict situations were made.

My health wasn't very good during that period so I couldn't count on a very positive frame of mind whilst performing my task, which was to co-direct the session and coordinate relations between the participants and the trainers. I really liked a participant from Belgrade, who I exchanged understanding looks with. We even spent some time on our own in my room one evening, but I was concerned about my health and we only talked (even though it was very pleasant). Vojislava and I were delighted to meet again when I went to visit her in Belgrade and we still have a good relationship.

The third session (in English, Serbian and Albanian) on «Problems and methods in the organisation of a training course» took place in the House for Peace [*Casa per la Pace*] on the outskirts of Florence in February 2001 and lasted a week. There were 26 participants (22 were from various regions of Kosovo and 4 were from Serbia, Belgrade and Pancevo) selected from among those who had taken part in the previous two sessions. At first, the two main groups formed by Kosovo-Serbs (and Serbs from Serbia) on the one hand and Kosovo-Albanians on the other hardly mixed (with few exceptions), but after the first few days, a friendly relationship was established among

the participants of the different ethnic groups, although the inevitable different and conflicting ways of expressing themselves sometimes contributed to making the atmosphere tense.

The language was one of the unresolved reasons for the conflict between Kosovo-Albanians and Kosovo-Serbs. To make things worse, I unwittingly contributed to the tension when one evening I thought of wishing a group of Albanian Kosovars, who were sitting round a table, good night in their language — Albanian — exclaiming «naten e mire». Alas, bowing and stretching out my arms, I wished them good night, instead, with a solemn: «laku noć». The intentions had been the best, but I had wished them good night in the wrong language: Serbian! A guy who I was on friendly terms with cheered me up, saying: «Francesco, you must be very tired indeed...»

We managed to go out a lot in Florence, attend a conference on Human Rights organised by Alberto, visit the city centre, go to the stadium to see the Fiorentina football team play a friendly match and some evenings the different groups went to a nearby pub. During the three meetings the issues were addressed using techniques such as: role-play (aimed at cooperation based on communication and building up trust); brainstorming on spiritual, religious and cultural resources for non-violence in Kosovo; the Theatre of the Oppressed (theatrical techniques for education against violence); lessons on the peaceful transformation of conflict and methods of non-violent action (with the example of Medellin in Colombia, with women's nonviolent action); Johan Galtung's Violence Triangle — theory on Peaceful Conflict Transformation; alternatives to conflict and the concept of reconciliation with various examples, including the reconciliation in high schools in Kosovo (1990-2000); organization of a training course; transfer of knowledge and skills; coming together of people from different ethnic groups. The participants found the course interesting and many of them established good relationships, but it was still early days to claim that they would become close friends

simply because they frequently conversed and were willing to spend some time together.

As organisers of the course we discussed whether there were grounds to speak of an actual Reconciliation in Kosovo, we then we tried to understand if and how any training activities could be carried out by the participants. We also spoke about the possibility of organising a follow-up to the participants' training, and where this could be held. Some of the participants were eager to start holding training courses as soon as possible in their local communities, universities, parishes, prayer groups and NGOs for the benefit of any other interested party, by simply spreading the word at work or among their friends. We also spoke to the participants about the possibility of follow-ups. Some young Albanians welcomed this prospect, whilst some Serbs from Belgrade made vague statements and so we decided to arrange a follow-up in Pristina and another one, later on, in Belgrade, but in the end we didn't hold either. We thought that one of the possible topics of the in-depth refresher courses could be a comparative analysis of the legality, under international law, of the armed intervention in Kosovo, Iraq (1991) and Afghanistan. We also considered the possible establishment of a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in Kosovo, following the examples of the Commissions for Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa and Guatemala.

## **Leading up to the End of Mission and my return**

Florence was a short, interesting and enjoyable break from my official work assignments, which went on, foreseeably, in an increasingly tense environment. You had to focus simply on the activities that you could actually carry out so as not to be overwhelmed by sadness, and avoid pondering over the tragic situation that reigned in Kosovo, encouraged by the thought that your work could actively contribute

to Kosovo's social growth. However, I often became dejected because many of my closest friends had left or were about to leave the Mission. And so I tried to avert melancholy by planning weekend outings, trips abroad, and thinking of what I would do once back in Italy.

Fortunately, Valentin stayed on in Kosovo and we continued to work together (Valentin came to Florence with me), but above all we became even closer friends. Valentin invited me several times to spend a few days at his house, which, like mine, wasn't far from the OMiK headquarters, and on those occasions he told me about his Buddhist spiritual path and about his healthy diet. I listened to him with great interest, though I imagined that I would have difficulty putting his philosophy of life into practice due to my inconstancy. He also hinted at the possibility that I move in with him and I did actually consider it for some time. The idea of living with a close friend with whom I could explore spiritual issues was tempting. Moreover, we often worked together and he would also do the cooking for both of us. I considered his offer for about ten days but in the end I decided not to accept, because in fact I have always liked living alone and, although I wasn't well, I wanted to feel free in Pristina too. We often went out together during the weekends and we also made friends with our colleagues from the local OMiK Office and with some Serbian Kosovar men from Strpce — a Serb enclave close to the ski resort in Bresovica.

Bresovica is breath taking, so we grabbed the chance and took the cable car, spent a wonderful time ice climbing and wolfed down delicious pizzas at Tina's, almost at the top of the mountain and close to the cable car stop. The cable car had just been reopened in Bresovica after being closed for a long time due to the bombings. It was a real paradise for both the Serb-Kosovars living in Strpce, and our local Mission colleagues. Bresovica is also the paradise where Patricia and Alessandro fell in love in 2002. Only very recently, after more than 14 years together, on 30 April 2016 they got married. Their common friend, who was responsible for introducing them in Bresovica, was

invited to their wedding! Now Patricia and Alessandro are a happy family, with their children Diego, Eduardo and Diana.

The Serb-Kosovars living in Strpce had cars with Serbian license plates, but it was very dangerous to go to Serbia in those cars because of potential attacks, so the only option was to find alternative transport northwards. You had to take a small bus that ran only once a week to the road leading North, then take a night bus (which had to be escorted by KFOR military) to reach the border with Serbia and finally get onto a Serbian bus.

It saddens me to think that nowadays there are fewer Serbs living in Strpce and that all tourist-linked activities in Bresovica are controlled by Albanians. Among the Serb-Kosovars I knew in Strpce my dearest friend was Srecko, who I was afraid to lose all contact with. When I called him from Italy a few years after the Mission he told me that, because of the many hardships that a Serb-Kosovar living in Strpce had to suffer, he had decided, like many of his fellow citizens, to move to Serbia where his cell phone didn't work. Not long ago, at the end of March 2014, I searched on the internet and found out not only that he had returned to Kosovo, but that he even had a prominent position in the Kosovar government: Chief of Cabinet in the Ministry of Communities and Return. He was so happy to receive my phone call after such a long time!

Valentin and I also spent a weekend in Sofia and went on a day trip to Lake Ohrid. The trip to Sofia was unforgettable. We travelled in his tatty old Ford Escort and it took us about seven hours to cover just over 500 kilometres from Pristina to Sofia. On the way there Valentin kept telling me not to worry if he was driving fast and that, despite all appearances, his car was OK (even though the heater wasn't working and it was winter so you had to wrap up warmly...). Nevertheless, I did worry a lot and couldn't relax, especially along the devastated road between Pristina and the FYROM border, which we drove along late in the evening at break-neck speed, with me gripping my seat.



Outside *Tina*’s, in Bresovica, with Srecko and Jelena.

When we reached the border we had to face the same old nightmare. Moreover, we weren’t driving an OSCE jeep, which would guarantee preferential treatment and a certain priority in the Kosovo part — controlled by KFOR. To cross the border, you had first to pass through the check-point of the KFOR troops (that searched the vehicle to verify that there weren’t any weapons), then you were asked to get out to be searched and walk to the Customs controlled by United Nations officials. Then you had to go through the customs controlled by FYROM officials and finally return to your vehicle to head towards Bulgaria.

You had to pass over the bleak mountains to cross the border and that time, as always in winter, we had to do it in the freezing cold, in the snow, walking on ice and in mud. You had to be very careful not to get dirty and to avoid slipping, since you had to carry all your luggage. While we OSCE officials had preferential treatment at the Kosovar customs, we didn’t have any cards to play at the FYROM

customs, so all we could do was to queue up in the long line of cars and other vehicles leaving or trying to leave Kosovo (sometimes they were sent back because they didn't have the right documents or for other irregularities).

After getting through the FYROM customs we finally reached Bulgaria driving at a more leisurely pace. We travelled swiftly along the beautiful motorway to Sofia, in Valentin's «Ferrari» Escort that was finally able to show off all its power! Sofia had all the contradictions that often characterise metropolis in Eastern Europe: on the one hand there was a fine historic centre with ancient buildings, wide avenues and good restaurants and on the other hand there were dirty, squalid outskirts, where blackouts and water shortages were quite frequent.

Valentin had a small flat near the historic centre so we spent all Sunday walking round the centre, enjoying Bulgarian specialities and visiting some important sites such as the Aleksandar Nevski Cathedral — the largest and most impressive monument in Sofia. Located in the homonymous square, this Orthodox Cathedral, which is also the seat of the Patriarch of the country, is one of the most important symbols in Bulgaria. Its foundation stone was laid in 1882 and the craftsmen and artists had to work for thirty long years before completing this huge church, which is said to be able to accommodate over 10,000 people. Easter 2000 was memorable: in a week I had the opportunity to attend first the Catholic Mass and then, a week later, the Orthodox Easter ceremony in the Orthodox church in Strpce. I found the Orthodox ceremony more solemn than the Catholic Mass, with its many hymns (in particular I remember «Gospodi pomiluj», «Lord have mercy») and the Orthodox priests in their black habits and long beards. Sadly, I read in the news that on 31 January 2013 that Orthodox church was damaged and desecrated.

Valentin and I made use of a helicopter on several occasions, a great Ukrainian military helicopter used by the United Nations to fly backwards and forwards between Pristina and Skopje, which was

made available also to officials of the other UN Organizations. The first time we travelled by helicopter we arrived late at the military base and so we were literally thrown on board and take-off was immediate, even though I didn't even realise it... so, after a while I gestured to Valentin trying to make myself understood notwithstanding the terrible din inside the helicopter: «when do you think we will take off?» Valentin replied by nodding towards the window. I looked out and saw the countryside on the outskirts of Pristina. It was only then that I realised to what extent I had been baffled by the agitation for arriving late at the military base and the din inside the helicopter.

The period between October 2000 (almost immediately after the session of the course in Ohrid) and January 2001 wasn't particularly interesting work-wise. Although I had been promoted in December 2000 to Senior Program Officer, which entailed greater responsibility and only a small increase in salary, this was not satisfying enough for me and I had to keep myself busy, so I tried to accomplish a project that I had had in mind for some time: to organise an international jazz festival, the first after the conflict. I endeavoured to find colleagues from the Mission to help me develop my project and I was lucky to find a strong supporter in the Director of my own Department, Arne Piel Christensen (a thickset man with a white beard and white hair, who vaguely resembled Father Christmas). He was a Dane who loved jazz and owned the *Copenhagen Jazzhouse*, an important jazz club in Copenhagen. Arne called me into his office so that I could outline my project to him. Following one of Mirela's ideas, a dear Romanian friend of mine from the Training Section who helped me define my project, I thought it would be a shame if the festival was organised solely by an International Organisation without national contributions, and to this end she recommended that I involve a certain cultural association in Pristina.

Unfortunately, the collaboration with this association caused me great disappointment and its manager even kept some funds from



the European Union for himself (in addition to 3,000 German marks from Arne Piel Christensen...). I suffered many disappointments whilst organising the festival, and even though I had known from the start that Mirela wouldn't always be of great practical help, I had never expected the greatest disappointment — almost a blow to me — to come from her, a person I had till then considered a friend, who had assured me of her support and who suddenly vanished into thin air. The special guest of the festival should have been the Paolo Fresu Quintet and I saw to all the activities related to their concerts, booked the musicians' flights and kept in touch with the band manager, Vic. After being forced to postpone the musicians' trip to Pristina and after having spoken to Vic on the phone the afternoon before the third flight (after the previous two flights had been booked and cancelled) to tell him that I was forced to cancel also that one, Vic said: «I think we should cancel the Paolo Fresu Quintet's tour in Kosovo... What do you think, Francesco?»

I had no choice but to agree, of course. Having to call off the festival I had so longed for after putting so much into its organisation, for which I even had the posters ready, was to me the greatest defeat of the whole Mission, even though I had done all I could to make it happen. This failure saddened me a lot and I only managed to set my mind to other things and thus regain my peace of mind by plunging back into work at the Mission. I was also dispirited after returning from the session in Florence, thinking about the loneliness I would experience at not seeing my bright and cheerful students anymore, at least for the time being. I made my mind up not to ask for a further six months' extension of my contract on the Mission. After all, I had accomplished all the things I believed in most, I had little motivation left and my closest friends had either left or were about to leave the Mission. This cycle was coming to an end and I started thinking more seriously about which new mission I could take part in, so I sought advice from my colleagues both at the OMiK and the UN, where I

went in person (to the Administration building), and I also spent a lot of time searching on the internet.

In any case, I continued to take care of my spirituality and I often went away for the weekends, as I had always done, choosing places where I could leave all stress behind, especially in Strpce and Bresovica.

On a warm Thursday in spring I went to the Movements Office and booked a car for the weekend. When I arrived in Strpce I went to the OMiK Office where I was met by Valerie, a kind French girl who told me that all her colleagues had gone to Prizren for a conference and that she couldn't put me up. I didn't lose heart and I immediately reserved a hotel room at the Narcis, a majestic hotel in Soviet style that dated back to the period when Josip Broz Tito governed the country. I had previously stayed at the Narcis and had a pleasant memory of it, so I knew I would be comfortable there. The reception staff were very kind, they gave me a good room and I immediately sprawled out on the bed, because I needed to rest after a stressful day.

It was still afternoon, I would think about dinnertime when I woke up. I already had in mind to invite Valerie out for dinner at a restaurant on the banks of the river that flowed through Strpce, where I had had a very pleasant meal a few weeks before. However, as soon as I lay down I realised that I wasn't at all well, but I decided to stay in bed, hoping that I would soon be feeling better. After an hour it became quite clear not only that I couldn't sleep, but that I couldn't even get up because of a splitting headache, nausea and weakness. I was alarmed, so I tried calling the reception, but I got no answer. So I tried to overcome the feeling of sickness and dragged myself out of the room where I saw some Serbian boys, who had been skiing and were back in the hotel after a long day in the mountains.

In the little Serbian I knew I told one of them that I was sick and that I couldn't get up. He said only «jedna minuta» (one minute), walked away and came back shortly after with one of the group

leaders, a girl who spoke good English. She, in turn, called somebody else, they lifted me up and put me back on my bed telling me not to worry and that they would call one of the hotel staff. A man from the reception came upstairs after a little while and together we called the OSCE office and a doctor in Strpce. Valerie and the doctor arrived at the hotel almost at the same time and Valerie listened as I spoke to the doctor. I didn't want to reveal what I was suffering from (as it would have been unwise for reasons related to work), so I simply told him that I had had a sudden and unexpected sense of fatigue (in fact, I could never have imagined feeling so weak all of a sudden), without providing any further explanation. The doctor gave me a tablet of caffeine that didn't have much effect and gave me a little time to decide if I agreed to be admitted to the hospital in the nearby US military base in Bondsteel (which is still the largest US military base outside the United States).

When the doctor left the room, Valerie asked me anxiously: «what's wrong? You can tell me. Even if it's something that contravenes the requirements of the Mission and which you are fully aware of, I will keep it to myself. You know that the doctor has thought about calling a helicopter to take you to Bondsteel, is that what you want?» At that point I felt I had to talk to her open-heartedly and explain my health condition. I told her that perhaps it had been a sudden relapse that would in all likelihood soon be over. Valerie said that she didn't feel up to staying alone with me during the night and so, even though she didn't think that my idea of returning to Pristina that very same evening was a good idea, I tried to reassure her and I convinced her to look for someone who could drive me home.

Although deep down I knew that everything would be all right, I was worried too, because, among other things, I had moved once more (I now lived in Wolfgang's former flat, which was on the fourth floor and which had a lift that was often out of order). Two very polite assistants took me back to Pristina: one of them drove my car

and I kept him company, and the other one drove a jeep of the office in Strpce. Before reaching home we stopped at the KFOR hospital where I explained what had happened to me. They checked my pulse rate and gave me a general check-up. They told me that there was nothing seriously wrong with me and that I could spend the night in the hospital (which I immediately refused) and that it would be wise to have a further medical examination the next morning. Despite all my worries I got a good night's sleep and the following morning I went to work without going to the hospital, as I couldn't see the point.

In any case, I wrote to my doctor in Sardinia immediately (all communications had to be via e-mail), and the prompt answer I got was comforting: if I continued to feel well I could go on like this without taking any particular steps. It had probably been a passing minor crisis, which I could recover from without any medication. Luckily, that is just how it turned out and that morning I went to work and started to think again about my future commitments for the spring of 2001. I was almost sure by then that I wouldn't apply for the fifth renewal of my six-month contract, so I just carried on with the projects that were already planned and outlined, which in my case mainly concerned the medium-term courses.

In the meantime, Pristina was undergoing constant transformation: a cinema, many restaurants, travel agencies, car rentals and anything else that could attract international visitors had popped up due to the numerous Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisations that had based their offices there, so the town was gradually losing its rural air. One day, as I was walking home from work, just as I was walking past the Cappuccino bar, I realised I couldn't see well from my left eye, but I wasn't too bothered about it, as I attributed it to the intense working-day and I thought that it would be back to normal after a good night's sleep. But I became very worried during the night, as every time I got up to go to the toilet I realised that my eyesight was getting worse. I could see even less from my left eye the

following morning and, within a week, I realised that I was almost blind in my left eye.

I didn't tell anybody at work about my problem, I kept on working and moving about normally, both on foot and driving the jeep, using only my right eye and closing my left one. I also informed my doctor, who I had established a close relationship with, and she replied that she thought it was «retro-bulbar optic neuritis» (an inflammation of the optic nerve), and that I had to start treating it as soon as possible with cortisone injections. I went to my local doctor straight away, who reassured me and told me that there was no problem: they could give me the injections, but I had to buy the cortisone at the nearest chemist's. I went to the chemist's that same day and in two days I was able to begin the one-week treatment, then I waited for the cortisone to do its job. During the following ten days I wrote several times to my doctor in Sardinia, who told me that I would have to wait ten to fourteen days because cortisone doesn't always have an immediate effect, so I waited, a bit distressed, since I didn't know if and when I would get better.

I also had two eye tests in Pristina, one with a private ophthalmologist and one with a Russian ophthalmologist of the KFOR military base, which was very thorough and complex (especially due to language difficulties: I don't speak Russian and the Russian doctor didn't speak good English, so we had to ask a German officer for help!), but the diagnosis they both made was simply impaired sight with no further explanation of the possible cause. Within two weeks I recovered the eyesight in my left eye pretty well, though not completely; however, I felt that I could no longer stay on in the Mission. Although I had more or less decided to leave the Mission when my contract expired a few months later, I was very sorry to have to leave so suddenly. But I had no choice, so I thought it would be best to find a good excuse to ask for permission to leave the Mission in a few weeks' time, on 21 June 2001. Unfortunately, I would also lose quite

a lot of money (more than 7,000 Euro), but I soon put my mind at rest, at least on this matter: I have always been able to accept reasons of force majeure without dwelling on them further.

I explained to Wolfgang, Arne and the Personnel Administration that for (unspecified) family problems I was forced to leave the Mission and get ready to leave Kosovo. The worse thing was the sadness that overwhelmed me when I realised that for reasons that were not very clear and that didn't depend on my will (it was the first time that MS had affected me so seriously) I was forced to leave a job that I liked and a country which I had grown fond of. I told only Valentin what the real reasons were and he told me not to lose heart, because I would soon find a reason for what was happening, so he strengthened my conviction that you always have to look on the bright side of life. I told Waldemar about my decision one day, as we were walking home together, though I didn't tell him the real reason, and he said: «are you sure of what you're doing? It won't be easy to find a job like this and, after all, living in Kosovo isn't bad; it is easy to go on holiday from here and you must come to visit me in Poland this summer.»

I told him that my work experience in Kosovo was highly qualifying; therefore, I should have no difficulty finding a similar job after returning to Italy. But I wasn't totally convinced about it myself and I knew that Waldemar might be right because he had a lot more experience than me.

I wanted to go to Strpce one last time before returning to Italy, so I went up in the mountains, had a pizza at Tina's with Srecko and spent the night at the hotel Narcis, where they remembered me and asked if I was better. I didn't get a chance to say good-bye to Valerie because she was in France, but I still have a pleasant memory of her.

On my way back to Pristina, sadness got the upper hand and I did something crazy: I was driving at 90 km/h — just over the speed limit (80 km/h) when I came across a long queue of KFOR military

vehicles moving at a much slower pace. All of a sudden I decided to overtake this long line of vehicles. This was totally and completely forbidden! When you come across a military convoy you must stay behind it. You can only overtake if the road widens and if the driver in the last vehicle of the convoy clearly waves you on. Instead, I started to overtake the lot on a narrow stretch of road with two-way traffic. When I had overtaken almost all the vehicles, near a fork where the road widens, I heard a siren, and then saw a police car speeding after me, signalling for me to stop. So I did the most stupid thing you can possibly do when the traffic police stop you: I argued with them (they were American and the American police were notorious for their «zero tolerance»). We argued, because I couldn't keep calm due to their abrupt way of contesting my dangerous driving, my exceeding the speed limit, and the fact that I had risked causing an accident overtaking the military convoy. I denied this, I hadn't been driving so fast and I hadn't risked having an accident. At that point they got really angry: they said they would call the Head of Security of the Mission and that criminal charges would be brought against me.

I was obviously quite worried and the first thing I did the following morning when I arrived at the OMiK building was to go to the Office of the Head of Security, who asked me straight away: «what happened yesterday? It was Sunday and a UN police officer called to tell me that you had been stopped for reckless driving! I know you and I know that's not the kind of thing you would do, but I had to call the Head of your Department and tell him what had happened.»

I apologised, he was very understanding but he also warned me that I would soon be summoned by the Court. Then I went up to the eighth floor with my tail between my legs and when I was about to enter my office I met Brigitte, a German colleague who was deputy Head of Department, who said: «American cops stopped you, right? Ah, you can no longer drive round in Kosovo undisturbed... Don't worry, I've already informed Arne and Wolfgang.»

When I walked into my office, Wolfgang reassured me too and I could thus put it out of my mind for the moment and focus on my work. The following day I received the communication I had been dreading: I had been summoned by the Court, where I would have to appear two days later at eight in the morning, although it wasn't clear what I would have to do there. I went downstairs to Ralf — the Head of Security, straight away for clarification and he explained: «you will be tried in Court! But I think you'll have preferential treatment, after all you are an OSCE officer and you were driving a Mission vehicle.»

I was rather alarmed: many things had happened to me up till then, but I had never been taken to Court! I decided to book a jeep for that day and went to the Court house at the time requested, well dressed and knowing just what I wanted to say to explain myself. But it was just a great waste of time: after a long wait the Court clerk told me in Albanian that the trial had been postponed to the following week. So I returned to my office feeling rather blue, as I realised that I would be leaving in only eight days' time and I still had many things to sort out. Therefore, I was not only concerned but also a bit anxious when I went back to Court, where I spent another couple of hours waiting, chatting a little bit in my fluent (!) Albanian with the others present, only to be told that the trial against me had already taken place and that I had to pay 120 German marks (approximately 60 Euro). Sure enough, it wasn't an insignificant sum of money, but it was far more desirable to pay than to face the legal consequences I had feared. Anyway, at last I could relax and put my mind to something else. So I started thinking about the day I would be leaving the Mission.

Three days before my departure, as always in these cases, a farewell party was organised for me and Hugo, an Austrian working in my Division who was going to leave the Mission just a few days after me. It was a good party; there were many of us from the different Departments and also from other Organisations in the big office next to that of our great Chief Arne. Also a lunch at the wooden



chalet-restaurant near the OMiK building was organised the following day with the other members of the Division, and later that evening I finished packing my suitcases.

These farewell preparations lasted quite some time and I had so many things to take home with me, considering I had been in Pristina for nearly two years. Indeed, when we arrived at the airport, the clerk at the check-in desk said: «you had better go to the excess baggage counter because I think you have a bit of excess baggage.» I wasn't too worried about this at the time as I thought that I would only have to pay a small amount for the excess-baggage, but when I was told that I would have to pay 300 marks I had to use dollars because I didn't have enough marks. When I arrived in Italy I sent my request for the improbable reimbursement and after two months Graziella — the blond angel! — told me that yes, it hadn't been easy, but I would be reimbursed in a few days.

I dreamed of Kosovo, my work and my friends for over a year after returning to Italy, and remembered with melancholia the times when I used to run with Zenonas on the outskirts of Pristina, so close to the areas demarcated with red stripes indicating the possible presence of mines. In those moments I used to wonder naively: «will I manage to avoid being blown up if I back off quickly?» The same thing happened when I was just outside Pristina because I had to be very careful when I was forced to get out of the car and walk in open countryside, as the presence of mines was not always indicated. For many months after the end of the Mission, when I was in the countryside near home I often happened to catch myself wondering if there were any mines there.



## Chapter 3

# **Back from Kosovo and the Master course, getting ready for new Missions**

I left Kosovo and returned to Sardinia in the early summer of 2001 and went straight to Oristano, where my childhood friends, who I hadn't seen since the Christmas holidays, were waiting for me and were eager to hear all about my «adventures». I had no end of stories to tell, which I could even have embellished, considering that Kosovo was generally perceived as a violent country, a country where a rather savage violence reigned. This, as I well knew, was often quite far from the day-to-day reality that I had experienced during those last two years. In short, I could have fed their imagination if I had wanted to, indulging in pure cynicism.

«I wonder how many dead people you saw in the streets!» an acquaintance of mine said one day.

«Not every day, because they cleaned the streets and removed the dead bodies every other day...» I went on.

Anyway, I had to have a check-up in Sassari as soon as possible to verify the stage of my illness, at the neurological clinic where my doctor worked. All the necessary examinations were carried out in

the clinic, also because I hadn't completely recovered the sight in my left eye. The laboratory technician that carried out the eye test of the visual evoked potentials (necessary to verify the response of the optic nerve to visual stimulation) even asked me: «can you see anything at all with your left eye?»

Once all the tests had been completed, the doctor confirmed that, in all likelihood, it had been retro-bulbar optic neuritis, that recovery might take a long time and that I might not ever recover totally. In fact, the sight in my left eye has never quite got back to normal.

At the beginning of July I went to my *buen retiro*, S'Archittu, where I enjoyed the sea, though I didn't fail to search on the Internet for any opportunity to leave for other Missions. I obviously kept a check on my eyesight, both on my own and by going to Federico, my optician friend, who checked my vision. Meanwhile, when I was still in Kosovo, I had applied for the Master course in Human Rights and Democratization, for which, as I learned in mid-July, I had been accepted. I wanted to attend that Master course in order to bridge the gap between my field experience and my lack of theory.

The course would last a year: the first semester would take place in Venice, and the second semester in one of the universities of the fifteen Member States at that time. It was an International Master course and students came not only from all over Europe, but also from other countries such as Canada, Brazil and Argentina, and the working languages were English and French. I knew that it would be very challenging and that, in addition, I would start interferon therapy in September, whereas I had never had any treatment up till then. Interferon is an immune-modulating drug: it tries to activate the immune system, distinguishing the major factors responsible for triggering the autoimmune reaction from the beneficial ones and suppressing only the former; this drug works like a traffic light activating the green light to let certain vehicles go through, whilst stopping others by activating the red light.

A new stage in my life was to begin in September: I would move to Venice and I would be treated with interferon. I knew that this could be effective — at least partly, in stopping the progression of my disease. However, the therapy entailed having unpleasant subcutaneous injections every other day, which could also have troublesome side effects. And so I moved to Venice, after seeing to all the necessary preparations: in Sassari, at the clinic, the doctors gave me the first packs of interferon, which I would have to keep in the fridge, and they showed me how to give myself injections with a special «pistol», whereas I would have to go to the hospital in Venice, where they would be informed of my arrival, for the next vials of interferon.

The lessons were to be held at the Lido, a beautiful isle, the only one accessible by car. The secretariat also helped students to find accommodation and I chose to live alone in a small flat on the waterfront close to a canal. I had driven all the way from Sardinia to the Lido with my Renault 5 and my bike secured to the roof, which aroused a lot of curiosity because, at least during the first period, I was the only student to cycle to the course (but during the following months others joined in).

I also got used to cycling to the ferry stop. The only unpleasant surprise during those months happened one night when, just as I was disembarking the ferry a bit later than usual (it was about one o'clock), I spotted some people busying themselves... They were trying to steal a red bike, still padlocked, which looked just like mine.

«Hey, wait a minute! That's my bike!» I shouted, alarmed.

Several minutes of heated discussion ensued, during which the thieves continued to claim, against all evidence and with incredible cheek, that it was their bike. I didn't back off (even though I was alone, so I was a bit afraid of how they might react), showing them the padlock key, repeating that it was my bike and that I would report them to the police if they didn't return it immediately. Luckily, they

handed it over to me in the end and I eventually got home just as I had come in the morning: by bike.

While I usually went to Venice mainland during daylight hours, many of my fellow students preferred the early evening hours to admire the wonders of Venice by night. One morning I went to see Bea, one of my Master classmates, and I noticed there were many clothes, but also many documents and mobile phones hanging on the lines inside her house... Many students had gone to a pub the night before and while they were in the pub the owner had invited them to go for a ride on his boat. Unfortunately, the owner was over-confident of the stability of his boat... The following morning those students became quite famous in Venice, since the local newspapers wrote at length about the boat that had sunk in the Grand Canal with many students on board, seeking help in various languages, trying as they might to keep their cell phones out of the water...

The Master course was very interesting and challenging; the professors were extremely competent and of international renown and the students, most of whom were young and with very little, if any, experience abroad, were good company and some were even witty. I got on really well with two of them in particular, Ara and Chema, both Spanish, as it had been easier to establish a friendship with them, due to my knowledge of their language and to the proverbial outgoing personality of the Spaniards. Ara and I became close friends from the very first month and she was the sole keeper of my «terrible secret» for a long time. It was only in January 2002, when we students went with some of our professors on a study trip to Sarajevo, that I decided to disclose my secret to Chema one evening, as on that occasion we shared a room.

Despite all my initial fears according to which I might not be physically fit enough to be able to finish the Master course, in fact I felt quite well during the first semester, although I had to follow a particular approach to things, which was very difficult for the others

to understand. As a result of this I was often looked upon as a solitary asocial person, even if I had a ready smile for everyone. Interferon produced the expected side effects, giving me a temperature, albeit modest, the day after the injections, so I wasn't able to devote a lot of time to studying (only three or four days a week) and sometimes I was so weak I couldn't even attend the lessons. I always tried to sit in a strategic place so that it would be easier for me to get up and go to the toilet. At home I tried to do my physiotherapy exercises regularly, but I couldn't take part in team sports (like football) with the other students because my coordination was already diminished. Anyway, I had never liked football, so it wasn't particularly difficult for me to resort, once again, to a principle that has always helped me in life: if I don't do something it's because I don't want to, not because I can't.

And how can you live in Venice without celebrating the carnival? You can't! Carnival came early that year, just before the beginning of the second semester. We couldn't organise the party (which was a tradition for the Master course) on the mainland due to the high tide, so we booked a club at the Lido. It was fairly close to my house and even closer to the Casino, on the sea front, so it took me only five minutes to walk there. When I arrived there, at about 6.30 p.m., half an hour late, I was pleasantly surprised to find many students and a striking, long-haired woman, wearing a lot of make-up, who I had never seen before among all the other students (whereas I did remember Maria, a Dutch woman, Anna, a Swede, Irina, a Finn and Tania, half Guatemalan and half German).

«Who are you?» I asked. «Who do you think I am?» replied the mysterious newcomer, surrounded by *masterini* (this was the general nickname attributed to the Master students) with a macho attitude. And, like me, most of the *masterini* were flabbergasted when we learned the truth — even though the most perspicacious had figured it out: it was... the highly regarded professor Manfred, the internationally renowned Human Rights professor from Vienna!

The party went well, it was another opportunity to socialise and help everyone to put their problems aside for a while. I danced only a little — I have always found it difficult to overcome the initial embarrassment, although some particularly friendly girls dragged me onto the dance floor. I spent most of the time talking to the people that I was on friendly terms with, and to those I had taken a fancy to, like Alexandra (Alex), from Britain, and Laure, from Luxembourg. But the second semester was about to start. I chose Bilbao as my destination, because there I could specialise in the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, I knew the language and the Spanish culture, and... because I would be close to Eva, the girl from Valencia who I had been in love with for many years.

The journey to Bilbao was anything but easy from the start. I decided to drive there in my Renault 5 with Janske, one of my fellow Master students that had chosen Bilbao like me: an endless journey first from Venice to Genoa, then along the Côte d'Azur. There we stopped at Roberto's in Hyères — we had been classmates in high school back in Oristano, then he had moved to France to be with his beloved, Florence. They had two children, Celia and Aurelien, who we played with on the beach all morning. Resuming our journey, Janske and I stopped in Lourdes (it was worthwhile, especially because we managed to get into the grotto of the apparitions when there were no tourists around, since a pilgrimage had just ended) and we spent the night in a double room in a small hotel in town. When we got to Spain we headed north, towards the Basque coast.

Bilbao offered a stunning view, as we entered it from its highest point, so we could admire the spectacular view of the whole city! The journey with Janske went well, even if she wasn't particularly sociable and was sometimes a bit awkward. I drove all the way (Janske didn't have a driving licence), but she was a good navigator. Once in Bilbao, we went to a nice hostel we had booked from Italy, where we stayed during the first days of our semester in Bilbao.



The next day I went to the office that helped foreign students to find accommodation, and that is how I met Mats. Despite many doubts (we had never met before, we didn't know our other two potential flatmates and we didn't know the area where the flat was located at all well — central but a bit dodgy), we decided to share the flat on offer. After just a month, however, we decided to move out, because living with the two other tenants had become very difficult, and so we went back to the accommodation office to ask for their help to find new lodgings, but at the same time we were also on the lookout for one. And so, this is how we finally found the flat we liked and we moved in. After a short time, Mats, despite his reserved nature — typical of a true Norwegian — began to confide in me. When he started a conversation by saying: «como eres mi compañero de piso», (since you're my flatmate), I knew he was about to tell me something confidential. This startled me a bit, and I couldn't help wondering: «whatever is he going to tell me this time?» Notwithstanding our initial mutual mistrust, we established a friendly and close relationship, and we soon became good friends.

I found it difficult to study owing to my health, but I also managed to go to Valencia in the end, where I stayed for a few weeks while I was finishing off my final dissertation, which I had written in English and had asked Mats' mother to reread and correct, as she was a native South African — therefore, a native English speaker.

During the period I spent in Bilbao, since I was registered with the A.I.R.E. (Register of Italians Residing Abroad), I was entitled to benefit from a discount on the purchase of airline tickets, so I grabbed the chance and went to Sardinia for the Easter holidays. Before leaving, though, I enjoyed the *Semana Santa* in Bilbao, with its folkloristic processions; all in all, it was a pleasant period. I spent a lot of time with Mats, and also saw quite a bit of my fellow Master students. Sometimes I went out with them and with the professors: we went to restaurants together, but we also organised trips. Therefore, I

concluded my semester in Bilbao getting to know well both the city, where now I could easily get about, and the region of Bilbao, with its beautiful coasts and towns so rich in history, like Guernica.

## Chapter 4

# Nigeria, my first Mission with the European Union

Two months after the Master course had started I went back to Kosovo for a week because I had been appointed by the OSCE as Election Centre Director and Supervisor during the Elections for the Assembly of Kosovo. I have a vivid memory of the Mission because it was like going home, but mostly because I worked with the lovely Barbara. I was in charge of the electoral centre and saw to every need of its eight polling stations; Barbara and I were also part of the group of supervisors. I spent almost all the time with her, as we shared the same hotel room. Miraculously, I even managed to keep my secret, that is, to avoid her noticing that I gave myself interferon injections in the *en-suite* bathroom every other day.

After the Master course ended I decided to settle down in Rome, which proved convenient both for the proximity to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and to Fiumicino airport, which would be the starting point for any possible future international Missions. Although I kept in contact with my neurologist in Sassari, I inquired about

other neurological institutes in Rome and in other parts of Italy. However, I realised that even if I were to be treated elsewhere, the treatment would be much the same, because the protocols do not vary throughout the country. Anyway, I didn't want to stop working on international Missions, so I searched through all the possible channels to find other institutes and, at the same time, I applied through the MAE to participate in Electoral Observation Missions with the OSCE and the European Union.

In the meantime, I had started dating Laura, a girl I shared many interests with who I had first met at a specialisation course organised by the MAE. Whilst waiting for the next possible Mission, I had accepted temporary teaching posts in high schools as a Maths and Physics teacher. One Wednesday in March I received a call on my cell phone directly from the organisational headquarters of the Electoral Missions of the European Union in Brussels. The very person responsible for selecting the international observers asked me if I could fly to Nigeria for a two-month Mission as a long-term observer, departing from Fiumicino airport on Friday. «What Friday?» I asked, somewhat alarmed, as it was already Wednesday... «The day after tomorrow!» was his laconic reply...

So I asked him if I could sleep on it and I promised to call him back the following morning. I immediately went to the park where I knew I would find Laura with her five-year-old son Gabriele: she always went there after picking him up from nursery school. I told her everything, though, deep down, I had already made up my mind. My news had a pretty awful effect on us: we had been together for only two months, our relationship was getting stronger by the day and I was already thinking of leaving. Gabriele had a fit of jealousy and started to cry when he saw that his mother hugged me, kissed me and wept. I did all I could to reassure her, explaining that after all it would only (!) be a matter of two months and that I could phone her often. But time was running short, I had to take action immediately

and jot down a list of all the things that I needed to do before leaving for Nigeria on such short notice:

- Contact my neurologist and ask her what she thought of my sudden change of program and what medicine I should take with me.
- Make arrangements to have all the necessary vaccinations, including the one against yellow fever, compulsory to be admitted into Nigeria.
- Buy some lightweight summer clothes, including two formal suits (necessary for the most important diplomatic meetings), as the weather in March in Nigeria is already terribly hot.
- Gather information on the geographical and socio-politic situation in Nigeria.

Concerning this last point, Laura offered to help me: we were close to her house and so she suggested we go there, because she was sure we would find something useful... Once we got there Laura busied herself looking for some book that might come in handy, but the only thing she came up with was the «Little one's atlas» that Gabriele used at nursery school, which wasn't exactly the most suitable source of information for my socio-political research on Nigeria. But, to tell the truth, the atlas contained some useful maps where the various economic activities of this African country were clearly highlighted in different colours. And so that was all the preliminary documentation that I managed to gather just before my first electoral Mission with the European Union...

The following morning, shortly after waking up, I called Brussels to let them know that I accepted their offer to work on the Mission, but I also asked if it was possible to postpone my departure till the following Monday.

«OK, Monday at the latest. You will be the last to arrive anyway...» I heard the EU official reply, to my great relief.

It was going to happen, at last! I was thrilled, as this would be my first Mission with the European Union and, what's more, I would be taking part as a long-term observer and not as a short-term observer, skipping, in fact, the first step in the electoral Missions of the European Union. Moreover, they had called me directly from Brussels! The next day I had all the necessary vaccinations, bought the clothes I needed and thought about all the things that I should take with me for a two-month stay. They were obviously two hectic days, after which, on Sunday evening, Laura announced: «a real Mission man must spend the night before leaving on a Mission with his woman!» «I agree!» I said.

She helped me pack my suitcases that evening and we set the alarm-clock so we would get up in time to arrive at the airport an hour and a half before the scheduled departure time. The next morning Laura drove me to the airport on time. A quick glance at my watch confirmed that there was still an hour and forty-five minutes before take-off. Perfectly on time? Not exactly... While Laura was parking the car and I was slowly approaching the check-in desk, a very polite but quite agitated ground hostess hurried towards me... «Please follow me, or you'll miss your flight!»

«Already?» I wondered, as I had been so diligent in planning every single detail.

I checked the time once more — this time glancing at one of the clocks in the airport, and I had to face the harsh reality: there was only half an hour left before actual take-off! The two careless lovebirds had forgotten to put the clock forward to change to daylight saving time! I didn't miss the flight, but I didn't have the time to say goodbye to Laura properly! Surely, to miss an intercontinental flight and the opportunity to participate in the Mission in Nigeria for such a futile reason would have been a real disaster!

My first destination on the African continent was Abuja, the capital of Nigeria. I was taken there directly from the airport to the

garden of the Sheraton Hotel, where the international observers were due to meet the diplomatic corps of the European Union.

This was a pleasant way to get acquainted with my new fellow observers who had arrived in Nigeria three days before, and with the core team (which, like in all the electoral Missions, had the leading role in the Mission). After the welcome party I went to my room, and then I joined the other observers taking part in the training course. Our first trainer was Heinz Jockers, an expert with an in-depth knowledge of the historical, geographical and social situation in Nigeria, where he had lived for many years. Heinz was a German giant and he illustrated the situation of the states that Nigeria was divided into. Two observers would be appointed to carry out all observation tasks in each of the said states.

My colleague from Denmark, Finn, and I would be responsible for the state of Kogi. When it was our turn, Heinz explained that the area we had been assigned to was quite far from the capital, where we were staying, and that we would spend a lot of time in the car. We had realised from the start that Heinz loved to crack jokes even when he was talking about difficult situations, so, when he jokingly said that it was very dangerous to go beyond a certain river, Finn and I weren't too bothered by the tone of his voice and we exchanged a knowing look, immediately thinking that we would have many other occasions to venture into that area at the end of the Mission.

Finn wasn't well and slept almost all the time in the car. Therefore, I had to see to the planning of all our activities alone, and I was always the one who sat in the front seat next to the driver to scan the road and the villages where we would later have to carry out our tasks as observers during the elections. Ours wasn't a very collaborative team; on the contrary, I found that I had to fulfil all the tasks alone. Getting to know the area was tiring and boring, apart from the time when I decided that we should go to visit the town of Lokoja, in the south of the state.

Upon arrival in Lokoja, Finn and I thought it was appropriate to pay a visit to the King, Magari III, as a form of respect, since we observers knew that often in Nigeria «traditional authorities» were more authoritative than the institutional ones. As we were approaching the Royal palace we became aware that the whole surrounding area was patrolled by heavily armed men, who had already noticed our car with the insignia of the European Union. After all, it was their job to control all access points to the King's residence.

Rather intimidated, we headed towards the entrance, where two guards stopped us and asked us what we wanted. We told them that we were observers and that we wished to meet the King, so the guards ordered us to wait while they checked whether we would be granted permission. We waited for a while and half an hour later the guards came back asking us to follow them to the King, who would grant us a bit of his precious time. So we entered the royal palace and, after walking along a narrow corridor, we found ourselves in a garden, where Finn and I had to wait outside a security door until the king was informed of our arrival. Shortly after, the guards finally ushered us into the room where the King was waiting for us.

The room was small — only 3 metres by 4, with no windows, red walls and a red sofa facing the door. To the right of the door there was a large television set that was left on throughout our visit. To the left there was a platform with the throne, that was red, where King Magari III was seated and, of course, he too, was wearing a red tunic. The King was wearing sunglasses despite the darkness in the room and he had three mobile phones close at hand. The King invited us to sit down by nodding towards the sofa in front of him without uttering a word, waiting for us to start talking.

We were both quite awe-struck in the King's presence, as he looked down on us from his throne — even though we couldn't actually see his eyes through his impenetrable dark lenses. After a little while we tried to break the ice and we timidly began by asking him



questions on the social and political situation in Lokoja. The King replied briefly with a severe expression, until I was so naïve as to ask him a more detailed question, which was, maybe, even a bit brazen...

«Do your citizens always agree with you when you make a decision?»

The King's expression darkened suddenly and, whilst fixing his gaze on me, he thundered: «of course they do! They obviously have to abide by my decisions!»



Before the King of Lokoja.

*(drawing by Paolo Marongiu)*



A representative of the electoral Mission of the European Union in Nigeria (Francesco in the background) with schoolboys and schoolgirls.

As soon as I realised that I had slipped up I endeavoured to convince the King that, God forbid, it was out of the question: considering His power and His instructions, any of his decisions could only be deemed to be «unquestionable», and I used my wits to excuse myself owing to my, hmm, language difficulties that sometimes risked causing inconvenient misunderstandings. Well... the situation was eventually saved and the two of us observers, with a sigh of relief... were able to carry on with our interview and the King went on listening to us with his gruff haughty and taciturn air, which was no longer as threatening as before.

After the meeting we headed back to the jeep, which was parked nearby. On our way there I saw schoolboys and schoolgirls playing in a school yard. They were wearing blue T-shirts of a similar colour to those of the European Union, so I asked if I could have a photo taken with them («selfies» didn't exist back then...), and the

school-children cheerfully accepted. It was fun and so my teammate and I finally relaxed after the tension of our recent meeting with the King.

Finn's health got worse and, after consulting me about his condition and his standards of performance in the Mission tasks, the core team decided to discharge him and send him back to Denmark. I was transferred to a team that was working in central-north Nigeria, in the state of Plateau, a predominantly Muslim area where there was also a significant percentage of Christians. Since I had never been to Africa before, observing the elections in Nigeria was an exceptional experience for me. On our way to the polling stations we passed by many malnourished children with swollen bellies. Moreover, the polling stations had imaginative names — although undoubtedly appropriate — like «polling station number five under the large palm tree at the entrance of the community», or «polling station number one inside the reception hut», or even «polling station number three in the shade of the banana plant».

I soon became quite well-known in Jos, the capital of the state of Plateau where we were staying, because I was the only *baturi* (white man in Nigerian) to be seen jogging in the streets around town. As violent clashes were quite frequent, we observers always had to move about with military escort and this limited our freedom of movement quite a lot. We were never directly involved in dangerous situations, although sometimes we had to be very careful, like that day when a riot broke out while we were observing a polling station. Our escort in the first place urged us to move about following a «strategy» so as to ensure that the members of a polling station and the people nearby didn't notice the presence of the military. In order to do this, though, we necessarily had to plan all our movements beforehand, including the places where we and our escort would park our vehicles. Anyway, everything went smoothly, even though we witnessed electoral fraud on many occasions, as we had expected...

As in all international Missions, we worked very hard, but after the elections were over the team of Jos decided to take a day off to go on a safari in the most important natural park in Nigeria, the Yankari national park. I had never seen so many wild animals! Some crocodiles approached, crawling along the river bed, while antelopes came down from the nearby hills and we could also see buffalos and hippos in the distance. The main attraction was in a nearby clearing, which marked the elephants' territory. An armed guide accompanied us: that is to say Amaryllis, Stavros and me (we formed the team of Jos), plus the group of observers of the State of Bauchi who had joined us for the safari that day.

The guide's role was to ensure our safety, accompanying us to the area where the vegetation became thicker and where the elephants gathered. Meanwhile, I went on taking pictures since photography has always been a great passion of mine... As our group ventured into the thick of the forest, we could hear more distinctly the sounds of the branches moved by the elephants, whose presence we started to get a glimpse of. I continued shooting photos of the largest of the elephants, which I photographed ever more closely as the group continued along the path. At this point I could take closer pictures of it as I focused on its head, but... at a certain point I could no longer get a sharp image: its head was so close that the image was too big to fit entirely into the viewfinder of my camera and, at that very moment, the elephant started trumpeting, probably annoyed by the proximity of a stranger. Thanks to the guide's providential shot in the air, the elephant moved on, so danger was averted and the fearless observer no longer risked being attacked. What a shameful end that would have been... being trampled by an elephant during an international Mission! After the safari we stayed at a hotel near the park where we had booked rooms for the night.

I «sacrificed» myself and shared a room with Amarillys, a Belgian colleague with beautiful eyes. Just as we were about to go to dinner I

heard some eerie noises: looking more closely I realised that it was a troop of baboons leaping from branch to branch, chasing each other and snatching whatever I threw to them. I later learned that they often went as far as jumping through the windows of the unsuspecting tourists to steal all the food they could find, and sometimes they even attacked the defenceless guests. However, the reception staff reassured at least fifty percent of us, since baboons are not a danger for men... but only for women!

The Mission of the European Union, in line with its principles of independence, drew up a fiery report on the irregularity of the elections in Nigeria. This report, however, was not taken into due consideration by some important Member States, to the point that the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, promptly flew to Nigeria as if nothing had happened to pay his compliments to the newly elected president Obasanjo the day after he was illegally elected President of the Republic.

My health was, all in all, good throughout the Mission, although a few days before leaving the State of Plateau I felt extremely weak and I even had a temperature... A bit alarmed, I went to the public hospital where the doctor decided to test me for malaria. When I returned to the capital the local doctors (including Qingaosu, clearly of Chinese origin!) advised me to be hospitalised (whilst the core team disagreed with this, arguing that: «you go to hospital to be treated for malaria, but Heaven knows what other diseases you might catch!»). I decided to contact my doctor in Sassari, who advised me to start an antimalarial therapy with Lariam. As a result, the symptoms of malaria wore off, but during treatment my sleep was tormented by turbulent and frequent nightmares about my past.

Of all those nightmares I remember a particularly terrifying one, in which I was locked in a nuclear physics laboratory where there was a radioactive leak, and despite all attempts I couldn't find the way out... In another one I found myself face to face with a deformed monster



that got closer and closer, until I recognised its features and... it was me! Many observers contracted malaria, even several members of the core team that had never even left the Sheraton Hotel. Anyway, the Mission was over now and, despite the malaria, I regarded this experience positively. I was satisfied with my work, I had received a positive assessment even if my initial team had been unlucky, and I was delighted to have met many people who I would presumably meet again in the future.



Amaryllis and one of our escort.

The day we would be boarding an intercontinental flight back to Europe had finally come. I had just completed the treatment with Lariam and I was still very weak, so the others helped me carry my luggage onto the plane and several colleagues asked me, with concern, how I felt. Then I asked Charlemagne — my dearest friend on that Mission, which was for both of us the first experience as long-term

observers — if she would sit next to me on the plane, though I told her not to worry if by any chance I happened to talk nonsense in the throes of a nightmare... This is not quite what happened: when we landed in Europe, Charlemagne told me that at times, during the flight, she had been alarmed because I wasn't always responsive when she spoke to me, since I didn't realise who she was. When I returned to Rome I went to a clinic specialised in infectious diseases to find out if I had, indeed, been cured of malaria, and when they told me that I could stop worrying I didn't think twice about it and I started my search for new Missions.





## Chapter 5

# Following the path of electoral Missions

During my first electoral Mission I had resumed the habit of taking notes regularly, and over the period I kept jotting them down in the language that came more naturally at the time, which was usually the language used on the Missions and for drawing up the reports. Subsequently, thanks to the periods I spent in Spain and Latin America, I perfected my knowledge of Spanish, which I liked to use when talking to the local people. Many years later I found those old notebooks that are an invaluable source for me in retracing the paths travelled and remembering my past experiences. Whenever I had a little spare time I also enjoyed writing down reflections regarding my health and the drugs that I had to take, my daily impressions and possible spiritual paths.

When I was in Nigeria, in the limited time available, I searched the internet for future long-term international Missions of interest, but there were very few, and I had the idea of developing a series of topics that could be the subject matter of university classes, based on the experience I had acquired. Little by little I convinced myself that

electoral Missions were the ideal type of Mission for me, owing to the crucial importance they had in the process of consolidation of democracy in countries recovering from a conflict. Free and fair elections are, indeed, the first step towards the strengthening of a democracy. Being based in Italy enabled me to continue to monitor my health so that I would be able to leave for Missions abroad when I felt better and after planning all medical examinations and necessary treatment. Moreover, thanks to my first Mission as a long-term observer in Nigeria and to the Master course I had attended, there was a very good chance that I could continue with the European Union electoral Missions, without neglecting those of the OSCE. So, when I applied for an electoral Mission with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, I was selected to participate in a short-term OSCE Mission in Montenegro.

This Mission was also a great «break» for me, since I got to know the wonderful coast near Podgorica as well as my supervisor, Monica, a Swiss woman from the Italian canton, who in time became a dear friend of mine, and was of great support to me. Monica introduced me to Ananda, a spiritual community near Assisi, which, based on the teachings of the Indian master Paramahansa Yogananda, combines Christian religion and yoga meditation. I didn't really look into the Ananda practices thoroughly because of my fickleness — unlike Monica, who adopted this way of life whole-heartedly. Despite my repeated attempts to practice the spiritual exercises of that community, I never managed to do it with any continuity, perhaps because I find it very difficult to engage in any exercise alone. I found it much easier to practice when Monica came to see me in Monterotondo, where I live, or in S'Archittu.

Thumbing through my old notebooks of the Missions, I found other notes on meditation and yoga classes (in particular, Sahatja yoga, with classes to be held right there in Monterotondo), which were due to start just after the end of one of the Missions. I also re-read various reflections on the possible benefit of considering my illness

as a companion for life and on how to follow a healthier diet, mainly vegetarian, rich in dairy products and carbohydrates and low in fat. When I left for the first Missions I was still able to run and walk, therefore, I had also made a note that I would benefit from regular exercise, such as jogging or walking and that both keeping a diary about my dreams, as well as jotting down reflections on the various subjects that I considered more significant, could be of help to me. I wrote at length about the meditations that I should then perform diligently on a daily basis, in the morning and possibly also in the afternoon.

In 2003 I participated in a Mission in Guatemala as a short-term observer and after the Mission I spent a lot of time travelling as a tourist. When I was in Tikal I was able, to my surprise and joy, to climb to the top of a very high Mayan pyramid and it wasn't even as difficult as I had imagined when I was standing at the base and looking up!

At the end of 2003 the time had come for me to go to Indonesia, which I was very interested in because my dear aunt Franca had already been there on a Mission (a Catholic one). Aunt Franca was the idol of all her nieces and nephews because every two years she returned to Sardinia with fascinating stories and many delicious cakes and gifts. As soon as I heard that the European Union intended to organise an electoral Mission in Indonesia I applied for it and thanks also to the experience I had gained, I was selected first by the MAE and then by Brussels.

In any case, my interest in Indonesia was due mainly to its social and religious status, the rising Islamic influence and the rate of violence. Indonesia was still suffering from the consequences of 33 years of dictatorship and of a genocide that was claimed never to have happened. At any rate, what most aroused my interest in this area of the Far East were the coexistence of different religious communities (with the consequent violent religion-linked clashes in recent times)

and the major separatist outbreaks in the archipelago. It was, therefore, questionable whether Indonesia was ready to move from dictatorship to democracy and, personally, I intended to look into the role of the non-violent movement in Indonesia, which was regarded positively.

Before leaving I asked my aunt, Franca, to give me the telephone numbers of her Sisters (in the religious mission), who gave me a hearty welcome when I took two days off to go and pay them a visit. I participated as a long-term observer and the Mission went very well, primarily because my teammate, Jacques, a former colonel of the Belgian contingent of the United Nations in Bosnia, was very experienced as well as being an extremely nice person, and we became very close friends.

One day some young women who wished to interview us came to see us in our hotel. They worked in the editorial office of a Muslim radio station with a vast audience. I immediately thought this was a wonderful opportunity, much in line with the objectives of the Mission — considering that Indonesia is the country with the highest percentage of Muslims in the world. Jacques told me that he didn't feel up to it and left me the honour of representing the Mission on the radio.

So, I made arrangements to meet the reporters and granted an interview. It was fun because, to tell the truth, the «journalists» were mainly interested in football and in the sexual habits of the interviewee:

«Do you like football and what team do you support?»

«Do people make love before marriage in Italy?»

«Do you have a girlfriend?»

«Do you have a lover?» and so on...

On this Mission I met people I had already met in the past and the Deputy Head of Mission (who, in fact, could be considered the person actually in charge of the Mission activities) was the same as in Nigeria. I received an excellent evaluation and this was just what I needed after the assessment in Nigeria.



With Muslim reporters of an Indonesian radio station.



## Chapter 6

# EUEOM to West Bank and Gaza

At the end of 2004 I felt ready for any international Mission. In particular, I wished to take part as a long-term observer in the European Union election Mission in Palestine. To be more precise, the exact name of the Mission in the «politically correct» official language of the European Commission was *European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) to the 2005 Presidential Elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip*, since the Mission documents never actually use the word «Palestine». The reason is that Palestine is not officially recognised as a nation-state at an international level. As I did for the previous European Union election Missions, I sent my application to the competent office of the MAE as soon as the notice of the Election Observation Mission was published on the EIDHR — *European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights* — website. Roughly two weeks before the scheduled departure for Tel Aviv I applied for the post of Long-Term Observer, for which I was officially selected only six days before departure, scheduled for 15 December 2004.

The days leading up to my departure were hectic, because, to top it all, I had a terrible bout of flu along with a high temperature. Therefore, even though I had confirmed my participation to the offices in Brussels, where the IOM — *International Organisation for Migration* — which had been entrusted by the European Union with the logistics of the Mission, is based, I wasn't certain of my departure until the last moment...

I would have given anything to be on the Mission, for many reasons. Over the last decades, international news and politics have been constantly focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict, which since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 had become even more exacerbated. I was very keen to witness Palestine close-up, and in the occupied Palestinian territories I would finally have this opportunity. In addition, the Elections that were due to take place on 9 January 2005 represented a possible turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian situation, since the people had been called to elect Arafat's successor.

This was a matter of particular concern for the International Community, as Arafat had often been regarded (by Israel and the US in particular) as an obstacle to peace. Sometimes he had even been considered a terrorist (in Sharon's opinion), or at least a leader unable to put a stop to suicide attacks or, worse still, an accomplice in the terrorist attacks. The direct Presidential Elections would represent a seal of Democracy: a President would be elected by the people through free and fair elections.

And so, when the 15<sup>th</sup> of December finally came, I decided that I couldn't miss that opportunity. Although I still had a cold and I was very weak after the high temperature, I boarded the plane to Brussels, certain that it would only take a few days to recover from the flu completely. As often happens in these cases, the journey was rather long because I had to go from Rome to Brussels and then on to Tel Aviv.





Map of Israel and Palestine.

(by Antonio Eltrudis)

The Mission had been organised at the last moment and the stop in Brussels turned out to be necessary, because we Observers

had to sign our contracts and receive our salary advance required to cover the expenses we would incur in Palestine. Thoughts of any discomfort we might encounter on the Brussels-Tel Aviv route and the subsequent transfer by bus from Tel Aviv to Ramallah were soon forgotten when we embraced some old friends of the great family of the European Union Observers, who we had met during previous Missions in various parts of the world. The trip to Ramallah, where the core team was based, would, in all likelihood, be rather tiresome. We were due to land in Tel Aviv at twenty minutes past midnight on 16 December, after which long checks by the Israeli border police awaited us, and then we would have the night drive to Ramallah, during which we would have to go through possible roadblocks.

## **The first moments in Palestine**

The journey wasn't so trying after all, because the border controls at Ben Gurion airport weren't too exacting, thanks also to the fact that the Security expert of the Mission had already informed the airport officials of our arrival. Moreover, we weren't Israel's major concern, as we were, after all, going directly to Ramallah, in the Palestinian territories... We had to put up with the inconvenience of waiting until three in the morning when we arrived at the Park Hotel in Ramallah, because the hotel staff weren't prepared for our arrival and our rooms weren't ready until an hour and a half later. The Mission had chosen this hotel as the venue for the training course for our on-the-field deployment that kept us busy for three days (which, luckily for me, wasn't too stressful...).

The theoretical training for the Mission was in itself of great interest to me; the analysis of the various aspects of our work on the field also looked into the causes of the conflict from a historical point of view, as well as the current social situation. This was a unique

opportunity to study the Israeli-Palestinian scenario thoroughly! The emphasis was initially on the role of the Observation Mission of the European Union, which had been invited by the National Central Commission in charge of organising and carrying out the Elections. In particular, the historical importance of that moment was stressed, with the election of the successor of Yasser Arafat, who had been democratically elected in 1996 but whose presidency had not been thoroughly democratic, considering his tendency to centralise all decision-making powers. The great importance that the European Union attributed to the upcoming elections could undoubtedly be inferred from the fact that the Mission was one of the largest Missions ever organised taking into account the number of Observers, especially considering that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip comprises a small territory.

Our initial training consisted in a brief crash course in Arabic, taught by an English teacher from Ramallah, who focused on the most common phrases in day-to-day conversation. Subsequently, Graham Usher, a British journalist who had been living in Palestine for many years, gave a seminar on the political situation, highlighting the major political groups and contesting presidential candidates. It soon became clear that, whilst some political groups were in favour of the elections, other groups (namely, Hamas) didn't consider them useful for Palestinian society. Indeed, the latter believed that the priority needs of the Palestinian population were to provide an effective solution to a number of primary shortcomings, such as decent housing, an adequate supply of food and, above all, negotiate less oppressive controls by Israel, which restricted freedom of movement considerably, creating difficulties in everyday life such as, for example, getting to work. Hamas, in particular, refused to acknowledge the existence of Israel; while the Nationalist Movement claimed «the liberation of Palestine was to be achieved by the Palestinians themselves». Although Hamas didn't support the elections, it didn't threaten to prevent them. We were,

nevertheless, warned that Hamas' supporters would counter-react if Israel strengthened its activities during the electoral period.

The unofficial reason to boycott the Elections was the necessity to reach a new national agreement with Al Fatah. The main candidates, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Mustafa Barghouti were both presented as moderate candidates, in fact claiming the need to introduce peace negotiations. The main difference between the two was that, whereas M. Abbas asserted that the second Intifada had been a disaster for the Palestinians, having brought about death and destruction, M. Barghouti acknowledged the possibility of resorting to armed resistance. According to Barghouti, the so-called Oslo Accords didn't in fact start a real Peace Process, but a form of colonial rule in disguise. Our training then focused on technical information regarding the characteristics of the elections and the role of Long-Term Observers, and it also dwelt on the presence and the attitude of the media, which was on the whole considered pluralistic.

It was clear from the very start that one of the major problems we would have to face was the possible Israeli interference aimed mainly at hindering the freedom of movement of citizens and candidates. This could especially damage the figure of Abu Mazen, owing to the common perception of the advantage he had due to his special status that gave him greater freedom of movement. In this respect, the recommendations of the Security Expert, the Spaniard Victor Perez, were fundamental, as he pointed out the importance of not crossing the line of our Area of Responsibility. He also explained that we were not allowed to enter the Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories.

Given the limited territory, unlike other previous Missions, a particular structure had been devised, based on the existence of *focal points* — made up of observers responsible for coordinating the members within each team and for connecting the latter with the core team. In each area there was to be an Observer appointed

as *Security Warden*. Said person would have to see to all the issues related to the Security of the Mission, keeping all contacts with the Palestinian police and with the Israeli authorities, verifying also that each member of the Mission within his area was safe and keeping the core team constantly updated. One of the *Security Wardens* would then have to divulge all information concerning security in Ramallah.

The last part of the training course was dedicated to the socialisation between the members of our team and other teams. Then we decided to spend a day to try to get to know the city of Ramallah, in particular the Moqata — the seat of the Government and Arafat's residence up until the moment of his death. The Moqata had been seriously damaged by the recent Israeli bombings. Life was fast-flowing in the streets of Ramallah, with many young people pouring in and out of bars and clubs. Ramallah was different from most Palestinian towns, with its clubs frequented by young people sensitive to the Western way of life, but above everything else, what was most strongly felt was their joyful approach to life.

## Hebron

My team was due to leave for Hebron, the final destination of our Mission, late on the morning of 19 December. We were advised to take the documents that we later learned to always keep with us, which were necessary to get through the countless checkpoints that we would inevitably come across in that area. We went to Hebron in two minibuses and it took us just over an hour to reach the Regency Hotel. We had chosen that hotel on advice of the core team, and we did, indeed, find that it met our needs perfectly, with regards to both the security it guaranteed and the location: it stood on a hilltop that towered above most of the city.



Two children, potential terrorists (!), asking for permission to enter the old city of Hebron on their donkey.



The two are refused permission to enter the old city and are ordered to move away from the checkpoint because of the dubious content of the donkey's saddlebags.



The journey was easier than expected because at the Israeli roadblocks the IDF — *Israeli Defence Force* — soldiers simply checked our passports without actually holding us up. Shortly after our arrival, a group of Palestinian policemen led by Mohamed Aziza El Kawassmy, an official of the Security Department of the Hebron police, came to our hotel.

These Palestinian policemen were extremely kind, they told us not to hesitate to call them should we need anything and they even offered an escort throughout our stay.

Our five teams assigned to the vast province of Hebron met in a meeting room at the Regency Hotel and we unanimously decided to consider the different teams as having a single structure. In fact, we entrusted each of the teams with a particular responsibility for the tasks that all the observers were involved in, in addition to the invariable task of observing the elections in each of the five specific areas that the province was to be divided into.

Based on the will and the individuality of the ten observers including myself, we decided which team would see to the logistics, which to security, which to relations with the local media, and in this way kept the core team updated. (Jerome, a French former lieutenant colonel with extensive experience in Central Africa, demanded to be in charge of the organization of logistics, including the meticulous surveillance of the hotel courtyard and the Mission jeeps parked there).

This coordination between the various teams was innovative: it had never been put into practice before, so we were all keen to see if it worked. This structure also allowed each team to gain an in-depth knowledge of the relevant issues and thus to avoid wasting time and energy in dealing with the other team members. In my case, the relationship didn't start off on the right foot due to my teammate's indolence at work, although I did, in time, manage to establish a pleasant relationship with her.



Israeli check-point just outside the Sanctuary of Abraham.



Two Orthodox Jews praying before the wall of the Sanctuary where the tomb of Abraham rests.





The tomb of Abraham inside the Ibrahimi Mosque. The Arabs can venerate it standing in front of it and the Jews can venerate it from behind barred windows.

The whole Mission was truly fascinating, owing to both the history of the place and the cultural wealth of the society. The Palestinians were particularly sensitive to the presence of the international observers: they placed high hopes in us. Moreover, they wanted the international community to acknowledge their genuine desire to prove that they could conduct free and fair elections, thus demonstrating that Palestine was well on its way to laying the foundations for a democratic society. Personally, I felt a bit uneasy when I became aware of the importance the listeners attributed to what I said, as they hung on my every word, revealing their trust when I highlighted the significance of our presence as Observers, of the importance of free and fair elections and of the resulting rise in consideration in the international arena.



The main street in the old city of Hebron with its usual crowd!

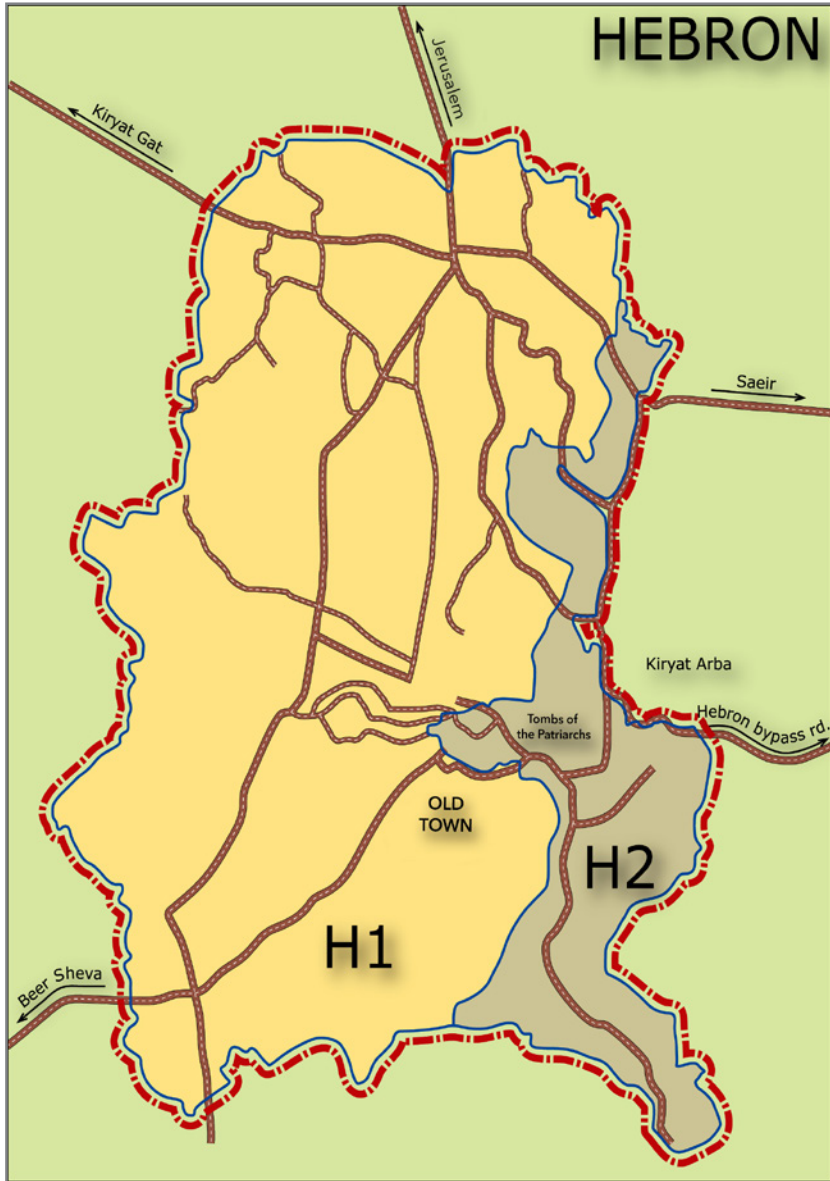
Although the city of Hebron fell within the specific area of responsibility of only some of the teams, during the first weeks of the Mission all of us observers had the opportunity to move around the city a lot. Therefore, after more than a month we got to know Hebron well, at least as far as the most relevant features of each district were concerned. Hebron is a large and important city in the West Bank and it is of great significance also to the Israelis for many reasons: the place of worship represented by the tomb of Abraham is there; many attacks have taken place there over the years; and finally, many terrorists that carried out terrorist attacks in Jerusalem were thought to have come from Hebron.

As shown in the map, the topography of Hebron is rather strange, since it is divided into two parts, H1 and H2. The H1 area,

which is much larger than H2, is inhabited only by Palestinians, while the H2 area, where the centre (the old town) is, is inhabited both by Palestinians and by a colony of about five hundred Israelis who are well protected, as they live in flats on the upper floors. The H2 area is under Israeli control. The Palestinians who had their activities in the streets in the town centre, or simply enjoyed strolling through those central streets, at a certain point were forced to fix rolls of sturdy wire mesh to shield themselves from the objects that the Israelis threw down on them.

I managed to take a lot of photos, even if all observers were forbidden to do so. I took many shots during the visit of our Head of Mission, Michel Rocard, former French Prime Minister. For this very reason both short-term observers deployed in the Hebron district and some members of the core team initially criticised my behaviour. However, after seeing the actual pictures, those same people changed their minds and asked if I could give them copies of the photos I had taken in the old town. As usual, I had not strictly abided by the rules written in the manual of conduct, but had behaved using my common sense, thanks to which I had understood how crucial it was to take photos, albeit with great circumspection, of the most significant aspects I had the privilege to observe.

When the many short term observers assigned to the different teams in Hebron were due to receive their initial training on the Hebron district I was asked to deal with the presentation, and I took the liberty of projecting the most interesting photographs I had taken. Among these, there were also some photos of an absurd Israeli military drill, which had provocatively taken place in the heart of the old town, just a stone's throw from children playing and young and old Palestinians on their way to the tomb of Abraham to pray, a place of worship for both Muslims and Jews and the scenario of a notorious massacre in 1994.



Map of Hebron.

(by Antonio Eltrudis)



The wire mesh secured by the Palestinians in the central streets of the old town to shield themselves from the objects thrown down onto the streets by the Israelis living on the top floors of the buildings.

We were delighted by the sight of snow falling on the city of Hebron: Palestine covered in snow was simply stunning. With some observers of the Hebron team we decided to spend Christmas in Bethlehem (the most beautiful Christmas in my life and the most moving one too, for the sense of the sacred inspired by Mass in the Church of the Nativity and for the multicultural congregation) and New Year's Eve in Jericho, where we also went for a dip in the Dead Sea. A few days before the end of the Mission we observers grabbed



the chance to spend a few days in Jerusalem, a fascinating though complex city. While we were there we witnessed the absurdity of what happened every day at the Wailing Wall, where guards armed with machine guns protected the faithful gathered in prayer. As the end of the Mission drew closer, we all agreed that the elections had been a success and our evaluation was soon divulged, thus raising the Palestinians' long-cherished hopes.



Israeli military drill in the old town.



Israeli military carrying out their exercise in the old town, in the presence of civilians.

I still feel a pang of sadness when I look back at the pictures of that land, so scarred by the Israeli occupation: the high wall dividing Israel from Palestine that in many cases cut families in two; the frequent checkpoints that make commuting to Palestine difficult, even as far as very short «trips» are concerned (ten kilometres or less).

The *bypass roads* are reserved for the Israelis, they pass right through the West Bank, at times skirting Palestinian homes, which sometimes become the target of shots and against which stones are thrown. I remember a Palestinian family telling me that they lived like near-hostages in constant fear, to the point that they had been forced to fence off their home with barbed wire, and when they heard cars coming from the near bypass road they didn't dare look outside or go anywhere near the windows overlooking that road.



A (fake...) wounded soldier during an Israeli military drill, and his comrade-in-arms tending him.



Another (fake...) wounded soldier, smiling although seriously wounded (!), during the same military drill.





Young supporters of Al Fatah during the electoral campaign.

This experience opened my eyes to the fact that there will be no peace in Palestine for the coming generations, especially as I saw that Israeli settlements, where peace was not exactly a priority, sprung up like mushrooms even right next to Palestinian villages. My opinion was also historically founded: Sharon, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, whilst publicly stating that Gaza would be freed, also told his countrymen not to worry because the West Bank would not be freed and the Israeli settlements would increase in number.

My opinion hasn't changed over the years; on the contrary, although the peace talks began decades ago, the conflicts and the terrorist attacks have never ceased and there are no reasonable peace accords on which to find concrete hope for long-lasting success. Therefore, I am even more convinced that peace in that area, as things stand now, is pure utopia. I was rather taken aback when, while I was strolling through the streets of Jerusalem, I saw Sharon's

residence, bearing so many Jewish symbols, provocatively built in the heart of the Arab quarter. I was very weak through stress and fatigue, so I spent the last day in Jerusalem resting and I took little part in the farewell party.

Another thing that dispirited me was the thought of leaving a land that had given me so much in such a short period and to which I felt I still had a lot to give for its democratization.

My return home didn't go smoothly, I kept suffering from the drawbacks of such a challenging Mission: I felt very tired and I couldn't walk properly. I spent a lot of time holding seminars, during which I showed the participants the photos I had taken while I was in Palestine, and participating in round tables. However, it wasn't long before I started thinking about the Missions I could possibly take part in that same year.



Palestinians at a polling station under the protection of Arafat's portrait.



Orthodox Jews in prayer at the Wailing Wall, under the armed protection of a guard carrying a Kalashnikov.



Orthodox Jews in prayer at the Wailing Wall.



## Chapter 7

# Burundi

In 2005 I reached the peak of my professional success because I took part in three long-term electoral Missions in three different continents, using the three foreign languages I speak: English in Palestine, French in Burundi and Spanish in Venezuela. The second of said Missions took place in Burundi a couple of months after the one in Palestine. Every international Mission is a very intense experience, so it was important for me to take some time off between Missions to recover the psychological and physical strength used up whilst abroad. Indeed, you always feel you've been away longer than you really have, and you need to recover all your energy before you are able to take on a new Mission in a country often characterised by a very different climate and social structure.

Burundi was a great challenge for me. Although over the last years I had, from time to time, brushed up on my French — in 2001 I had attended a course at *Alliance Française* in Paris — and I had studied some subject matters and sat some of the Master course exams in French, among the foreign languages I had studied, French was the

one I was less confident in. For this reason, I was slightly concerned that the activities I would have to carry out during the Mission might be hindered by communication problems. Quite to the contrary, I realised that I was one of the long-term observers who understood and spoke the official language of the country most fluently.

For the first time ever, the beginning of the Mission coincided with an annoying health problem. I got a nasty bout of dysentery, which forced me to postpone the actual departure for my area of responsibility. There was only one other observer who wasn't well at that time and strangely enough (although I reckon it was not a coincidence, but just another «sign» ...) it was my teammate. So, we weren't re-matched, our team remained as it had been initially formed and we simply left two days later. We were assigned to an area 400 km north-east of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, an inaccessible province whose main town was Muyinga; as soon as we arrived we realised that it would not be easy to live there.

First of all, Björn — my Swedish teammate — and I decided to take lodgings in a short-stay residence frequented by local workers or by hard up tourists. Björn and I had decided to live where Burundians with little money could afford to stay. Our choice had ethical grounds: we didn't want to be looked upon as «the usual fat cats from abroad», as we would have been had we opted for the accommodation reserved for officials of the UN or of other international organisations, which offered all comforts and were also very expensive. Our residence was dismal, there were black-outs and water shortages for many hours a day, so we got used to reading by candlelight or in the dim light of battery light bulbs, or even in the little light from our cell phones. We made friends with two women of the United Nations, who sometimes invited us to their house for dinner, or, in my case, even to take a shower, when I didn't want to strip-wash at the residence. It was difficult even to get a proper meal, since there were few restaurants and the food available was anything but varied: mainly eggs and fried



chicken. However, we found a bar where we went when we had a bit of time to have a decent breakfast, or for some business meetings.

From our base in Muyinga we often had to reach some remote villages up in the mountains that were hardly accessible along the bumpy winding roads, so it was incredibly difficult to reach those desolate outposts by car. The many administrations and polling stations were supplied with the necessary material thanks to the UN aircraft that often flew to the capital (the UN helped Burundi to organise the elections, whilst we European Union observers were responsible for verifying whether they were carried out correctly). Whenever we had to reach the remotest areas in the province it was like an adventure within the adventure. We started organising the day trips a couple of days in advance and everything had to be arranged meticulously. It was essential to plan our movements in detail so as to cover as many of the points of interest as possible, and to contact our reference points well in advance to arrange our meetings. It was also crucial to pinpoint on the maps where the police offices and the other organisations were along our itinerary and make appointments whenever possible.

When we arrived in the main centre of that area it took a while to recover from the stress and fatigue of travelling along those rough bumpy roads and soon we realised that the situation was even bleaker than we had expected. There was only one public telephone for thousands of people (never have I used the Mission's satellite phone so much as when I was in Burundi) and the polling stations were all in the main square where there was a big agricultural market the day we arrived... what folkloristic confusion! We had been called to observe the validity of the electoral campaign, of all the activities related to the elections in some way or other, and of the location of the polling stations, but to do so we had to push our way through the crowd: women spinning, pigs, chickens, cows and many other animals, fruit and vegetable stalls, meat counters, etc.



A UN helicopter supplying material to a polling station committee in a remote province in Burundi.

The month spent in Muyinga was very rewarding from a personal point of view, not only thanks to the friendship of our colleagues at the United Nations and the kindness and friendliness of the local election administration officials we were in contact with, but also because, notwithstanding the many inconveniences, I felt privileged to observe the elections in wild forgotten places and live side by side with the local population who led such a hard life.

In Burundi, more than in any other Mission, I worked in close collaboration with the United Nations to the point that, whilst maintaining the necessary autonomy and confidentiality concerning our movements and our conclusions, we organised common round tables and we exchanged information useful for our respective activities; in short, we helped each other in any way we could.



In Burundi the National Observers were very collaborative, and this enabled us to identify and report some communities where violations of Human Rights relating to the elections were being committed, such as violent impositions by supporters of certain political parties with the aim of ensuring that citizens voted for the «chosen» parties.

Despite all the precautions I had adopted against mosquitoes, including that of covering my whole body in mosquito repellent whenever I had to leave our residence and sleeping under a protective mosquito net that was supposed to keep mosquitoes out — in theory, at least — in the end I contracted malaria, once more in the Vivax form. This time, however, I had received prophylactic treatment and then I took Malarone, a drug that had recently been put on the market, that I bought from the Vatican pharmacy, since it was very difficult to find it elsewhere at a reasonable price. All in all, I was spared any serious side effects but I had to wait for a week for the weakness and fever to subside.



Elections in Burundi.



## Chapter 8

# From Africa to Latin America: Venezuela

... And so, I had already been on two Missions in 2005, one in an English-speaking country and another one in a French-speaking country, but I didn't have to wait long for the third Mission, this time in a Spanish-speaking country. A few months after the Mission in Burundi, the European Union launched the electoral Mission in Venezuela. I was very happy when I found out that I had been selected as a long-term observer, but I soon started to worry about all the things that I would have to do before leaving for Venezuela, where I was to stay for almost a month and a half. I would have to contact my doctor for medical recommendations, buy all the necessary drugs to take with me, make arrangements to have any vaccinations needed and find out whether going to Venezuela could be a risk for somebody in my condition because of the climate. Anyway, Venezuela is a large country, therefore there are various types of climate: ranging from scorching heat in the mosquito-infested coastal lagoons, to the heat along the coast, to the cold up in the mountains. Obviously, an international Mission is not a holiday: you can't choose your destina-

tion, and my team was deployed in the state of Zulia, whose capital is Maracaibo, which is notorious for having the hottest «muggy» climate in Venezuela. This kind of climate is the worst possible for people like me with MS, who suffer in hot humid weather.

As soon as I arrived in Maracaibo I started gathering information about the state of Zulia from local sources. I was glad to learn of its enormous naturalistic wealth and presently I learnt of its incredible history and of the vestiges of its civilisation. The very name Venezuela, meaning, «Little Venice», comes from the lagoons and the houses built around them in the State of Zulia. The Mission was nicknamed «the clandestine Mission» since no Head of Mission was ever appointed. Another reason for which it earned the nickname «the pioneer Mission», was the fact that, for the first time ever, an electronic vote would be under observation. These parliamentary elections were going to be held under the Chavez presidency. Although Chavez was generally considered a «populist dictator», it must nevertheless be said that he had paved the way for the development of a democratic society in Venezuela. Since Chavez had become president of Venezuela, no evident restriction of the freedom of expression had been reported in the media. Nevertheless, Chavez had the power to control and influence the states that supported his government.

In Venezuela I considered myself privileged because the Deputy Chief Observer, responsible for the entire Mission, was the skilful Domenico Tuccinardi, who had been Elections Expert in Nigeria. Despite his rank he proved to be unassuming: during the end-of-Mission debriefing he apologised to the core team members for having lost his patience on a few occasions.

As in every Mission, I met a lot of people I had met whilst on previous Missions around the world, like Charlemagne, Observer Coordinator, and Frans Jennes, Head of Security, who appointed me as person in charge of security for the state of Zulia. I was starting to like being Head of Security, because of the constant careful observation

of the city, the close contact I had to maintain with the police forces and the particular attention I had to pay to my fellow observers. This was the first Mission during which it was evident that I had problems walking. When my colleagues asked me what was the matter with my legs, I quickly answered: «I had an accident two months ago». Of course, life on a Mission is quite hard, but I realised straight away that I could cope. Indeed, I could count on the many people I knew and who esteemed me, like my French teammate, Marie, who was friendly, pleasant and pretty, and who treated me a bit like an older brother. Marie and I got into the habit of going on Sunday trips and on one occasion we went to a place near a beautiful lagoon. Marie asked our driver if he knew of any good restaurants in the area and Pedro recommended a restaurant built on stilts, right in the middle of the lagoon, which could only be reached by boat.

After lunch I had to go to the toilet so I asked where it was and tried to find it. When I caught sight of the narrow bridge leading to the toilet I thought it wiser to hold on until we were safely back on the mainland to avoid the risk of ending up in the water. My disease was constantly present, I was unsteady on my legs, I walked fifty meters at a time at the most, and then almost dragging my left leg. The most disturbing effect was the frequent need to urinate, which was caused by fatigue and stress.

As to the final assessment of the election process in the State of Zulia, although we could hardly ignore the unexpected withdrawal of the main opposition party, the elections went well insofar as the non-infringement of Human Rights was concerned. However, quite a low percentage of the population voted, due to the general mistrust towards the electoral process, mainly because of the new electronic voting system, for which the citizens had only received modest training, notwithstanding the efforts of the National Electoral Committee.

In the notes I had got into the habit of jotting down in my personal diary it clearly emerges that I was concerned about my social

life, which had inevitably become more difficult owing to my short stays in Italy. During the period in Venezuela I took new therapies and physiotherapy into consideration and I felt the need to start going to the gym again. I also resolved to look for a job and lead a less stressful life.

As the New Year started I made up my mind to try to avoid any potentially negative situations. I was sick and tired of listening to radio programs or watching talk shows on TV full of often heated debates. Once I returned to Italy I resumed reading the book *Guarire con la volontà divina* (Healing with the divine will), bought from the Ananda community in Assisi, where I promised myself to return soon. I resolved to pray, write my reflections in my diary every day, and stick to a healthy diet. I found great inspiration in Alex Zanardi, who had had a terrible car crash and had lost both legs, but who was determined to recover thanks to his strength and enthusiasm. He often said: «We are driven towards victory by our inner desire, you cannot give courage to those who won't listen.»

Since I had been in Burundi I had become convinced that it would be better for me not to participate in international Missions in Africa, because of the frequent infectious diseases and malaria, and to take into consideration only Missions in countries where there was less risk. I was reassured by the fact that I was often requested to take up temporary Mathematics, Physics and Computer Science teaching posts in high schools (after all, I had graduated in Physics!) and that the European Union electoral Missions were finally starting to pop up in many countries around the world. Moreover, being aware that I was appreciated internationally and that speaking three foreign languages well was a plus, contributed to keeping my spirits high.

## Chapter 9

# Belarus

At the beginning of 2006 I decided to take a break from the EU Missions and went to Belarus with the OSCE as a short-term observer for the presidential elections. The electoral observation in Belarus was of particular importance because it was likely that the elections would be held in a fraudulent way, since the dictator Lukashenko was running for president once again and he wielded enormous power and could potentially manipulate the results in his favour. The elections in Belarus coincided with the start of my love affair with Anna, a young Belarusian born just a few days after the notorious Chernobyl disaster, in a small town near the ill-fated Ukrainian plant. Anna was the interpreter of one of my fellow observers, so we spent a lot of time together. When she was a child she had lived with a Sardinian family for a short period and so she was quite fluent in Italian. Anna had been just a simple though pleasant distraction up to the night before leaving Belarus, when things changed. We went to a pub that evening, there were four of us but as I had to get up very early the following morning, at midnight I

decided to say goodbye to my friends and said something like: «I hope you don't mind, but I have to wake up at the crack of dawn. I'm sorry but I must go.» When we were in the taxi heading back to our hotel, Anna, who was sitting next to me, kissed me on the lips and said: «are you sure you want to go to bed?»

So I thought that it might be worth staying up with them until late and I ended up going to bed at three o'clock and woke up at five, very tired but happy. From that night on, Anna was in my thoughts for months, during which we started our relationship, first living apart and then, thanks to my tireless efforts (I contacted officials of the Italian and Belarusian Ministries for Foreign Affairs and made countless phone calls to both the MAE in Rome and the Italian Embassy in Minsk), she was granted a visa to study in Italy and came to live with me for a certain period.

I went to see Anna a few months after the Mission, after making an apparently rash choice but which, in fact, I had pondered for quite some time. One day I simply called her and asked: «what if I come over there to see you next week?» Anna was surprised, especially because she knew how difficult it was to obtain entry and exit visas for Belarus. However, I was on good terms with some MAE officials and with the Belarusian Consul in Rome, so in just a few days I was granted the visa required to enter Belarus. When I arrived in Minsk we rented a small flat for a week and sometimes I went to a nearby square and chatted with some children playing there. It was fun, but since I hardly speak any Russian we only exchanged a few words in German. I did, however, manage to utter a few words in Russian... which made them laugh so much!

Our love affair was very romantic, but when it ended I felt bitterly disappointed because she was the one to break our relationship off, although I hadn't kidded myself that it would last, owing to our considerable age difference... Anna has been living in Rome since then and now and then I still hear from her. She has recently



told me that she will never forget me and that I am very important to her. Needless to say, Lukashenko was re-elected hands down. He has governed Belarus ever since...



## Chapter 10

# **Back to Latin America: Mexico, Nicaragua and Guatemala**

From 2005 on I applied almost exclusively for Missions in Spanish-speaking countries, namely in Latin America, and I was always selected. Using Spanish as the main language at work was what I really hoped for, since I felt at ease especially in Latin American environments and this enabled me to communicate naturally with people of all ages. So, in 2006 I went first to Mexico and then to Nicaragua. I met up with a dear friend of mine in Mexico, Pablo, a tango guitarist from Buenos Aires, and I watched the football World Cup final at Jaime's house, a Mexican friend and fellow musician of Pablo's who accompanied him on the accordion. The core team of the Mission couldn't refuse us some time off to watch the match between Italy and France, least of all stop us Italian observers from celebrating the victory in the World Cup! My teammate was a Belgian woman, Catherine, who I got on very well with, to the point that we are still in contact (in Mexico more than on any other Mission, my teammate and I spoke in French, our own «secret» language, to avoid any eavesdroppers).

Many of us started to get ready from a psychological point of view for the possible Mission in Nicaragua, which was in the offing. The Nicaraguan elections would be very interesting for most of us, as one of the candidates running for president of the Republic was the former guerrilla fighter Daniel Ortega Saavedra who, although at 61 he was no longer active as a guerrilla fighter, was just as strong-willed and patient as ever. The champion of the poor, as nicknamed by most of the Nicaraguans (an anti-democratic according to most of the US administration and «the man who makes Reagan see red» as headlined in the «Time» magazine in 1986), had already governed Nicaragua from 1985 to 1990. After fighting in the guerrilla warfare with the Sandinista Front for National Liberation, he had undertaken a path that ultimately enabled him to reach conciliatory relations with the Church after lengthy «diplomatic» efforts. The fight against poverty and social inequalities remained his main objective. The «red nightmare» had, therefore, faded a little... The Mission started in late 2006 and, just as I had feared, I was deployed in one of the hottest areas of the country, since I was responsible for the provinces of Leon and Chinandega, on the Pacific coast, approximately 150 km from Managua.

The Mission got off to a very pleasant start: at the first meeting with the other observers and the core team I was happy to see my old friends again and our Head of Mission Claudio Fava, a very experienced observer, who had distinguished himself for having been recognised as worthiest Member of the European Parliament. So, there was a very friendly atmosphere in the Mission and I was lucky to have Cecilia as my teammate, a Chilean girl married to a Swede, and who thus was a Swedish citizen. Cecilia and I became very close friends, and I was soon convinced that I could confide in her and this is what I did. For the first time I wasn't embarrassed when talking about my health. My condition had got worse, I had greater difficulty walking, especially going up and down stairs. Cecilia was glad that

of all the people I had chosen to confide in her, but she agreed only on condition that she would be the sole person in the whole Mission to share my secret: nobody else must know. Cecilia and I split the tasks between us in order to make working together easier for both — especially for me. Using the computer was becoming increasingly difficult for me and she had no experience in the field of security, so, among the other tasks, she wrote the reports, I saw to the team security and accounting, and together we dealt with logistics and movements.

When we were in Leon I also had a crisis which caused me to feel very weak and sick, so all I could do was follow the medical protocol and have injections of cortisone as advised by my doctor in Sassari. Therefore, once a day for a week I had to go to the local hospital to have the injections, which meant taking only very little time off work. I was a bit worried because I hadn't been able to get in touch with my doctor in Rome, so I resorted to my common sense and followed dated medical advice which was, nevertheless, still valid.



Catherine and I with schoolchildren in the State of Veracruz, Mexico.



A photo of the electoral campaign in Nicaragua.

I told Cecilia what the decisive element was that determined whether or not I would participate in certain Missions. Up until then my health hadn't hindered Mission work, but if in the future things took a turn for the worse, I would give up working on international Missions altogether. During previous Missions, when I was sick I couldn't share my problem with anyone and this had made things harder to bear, since I had been forced to face the problem alone. On the contrary, in Nicaragua Cecilia's friendship was of enormous support. I felt a bit better thanks to the cortisone injections, but I made my mind up to have a proper check-up and maybe another cycle of cortisone with an intravenous drip when I returned to Italy.

Anyway, work was pleasant and went smoothly. We were in charge of a team of ten short-term observers who from the very start proved to be very competent and keen, so we didn't have problems.

Obviously, it must be said that it was a very large area and we had to reach remote municipalities. I remember clearly that a short-term observer, Alex, came to me one day with a very peculiar question that, looking back, even now still makes me laugh, and that was on the tongues of all the observers in the Mission: «are there any vegetarian restaurants in Los Pinos?» Los Pinos is a small town far from both Leon and Chinandega. He had hardly finished his question when I burst out laughing! «You might as well ask me if there is a restaurant in Los Pinos at all, because as far as I remember there's only one, and it's on the way out of the village... where, at any rate, they serve good meat!» I answered, after pulling myself together...

I also remember a wonderful day when Claudio came to see Cecilia and me and we went to the Court house; we also had a fruitful meeting with the President of the Court and after that, we did, indeed, have lunch in a delightful vegetarian restaurant!

The Mission went well and in the two provinces falling within our area of responsibility no significant incidents took place throughout the electoral process: only minor irregularities and minimum conflicts occurred when the members of the polling stations were appointed. We established a good relationship with the members of other international election observation organisations (the Carter Center in particular) and national observation organisations (namely, *Etica y Transparencia*). Notwithstanding the comment regarding the general lack of fair play by the media towards the different political parties, the outcome of the election observation was quite reassuring, so when we left Nicaragua we were satisfied with the work carried out and happy that democracy in Nicaragua was at last getting stronger.

When I was back in Italy I began searching, as usual, for new job opportunities and I tried to find out if any electoral Missions or other international Missions were due to start soon (Missions are usually published on the internet well in advance), but, unfortunately, the next one I was interested in was not until August 2007. Therefore,

I saw the period ahead of me as an opportunity for much reflection, when I could concentrate on a recruitment procedure of the European Commission (which went well, but I obtained a score of 5.75 out of 10, just below the threshold of 6 with which I would have passed the exam...), and still have the time to teach.

Then I went to Montenegro on a short-term electoral Mission and set my mind on Guatemala. Returning to Guatemala was almost like going home, as I had many Guatemalan friends and I knew the country well.

The core team decided to hold the training course in Antigua, where we spent two days. In the swimming pool of our hotel I almost had a vision: the stunning Naledi («star» in the Sesotho language spoken in ancient times by some South African tribes) appeared, a blond girl who resembled Romy Schneider in *Sissi* — the film. The moment I set my eyes on her I fell for her and I tried to spend as much time together as possible, and I also told her how much I liked her (which was met by a beautiful smile!). I told Naledi about my condition, which gave me a sense of relief.

I was sent to the region of Alta Verapaz (more or less in the heart of the «Land of Eternal Spring»), whose capital is Coban, where my teammate, the Austrian Britte, and I soon made acquaintance with the governor, who sometimes happened to invite us home for lunch or dinner or who we went to some restaurants in town with. It was a very pleasant stay, we even had the opportunity to see the natural beauties of the region and learn something about its rich culture, find good restaurants and welcoming (and very cheap) popular eating-houses.

Britte and I didn't get on too well: she was stern and was not too happy when she realised that I had problems walking. Therefore, she didn't consider me fit to be responsible for the security of the team. Despite Britte's lack of appreciation, Guatemala is the country where I most effectively took on my role as person in charge



of security, which also entailed being in constant contact with the police and the armed forces. When I was informed that some polling stations had been looted in the night and there had been gunfights in the municipality of Tucuru, I immediately informed the police that it would be necessary to go there the following morning to assess the extent of the damage. We went there with a small dispatch of two police vehicles (one was an armoured vehicle) to carry out an inspection at the site of the clashes. Upon arrival in Tucuru we verified that some polling stations had been vandalised, with the consequent damage of electoral material, and that there had been an attack by rioters at the police station (in the town centre), following which the looters had set fire to some motorcycles parked outside the police station.



Clear (!) exhortations to vote in Guatemala.

The atmosphere in town remained tense for several days and the elections in the vandalised polling stations had to be postponed for a couple of weeks. We European Union observers were already well-known and the police convoy sent to control the damage caused by the clashes only improved our image before the authorities and citizens.



The Police station vandalised in Tukurú, Guatemala.

At the end of the Mission Britte and I were really quite satisfied with our work and with the excellent relationship we had established with the administrative authorities, the police and all the electoral authorities. Among the recommendations we added in our final considerations were to take into account the need for greater international aid so that the roads leading to the remotest municipalities could be

repaired, to invest in voter education and to give the polling station representatives better technical preparation.

The most negative aspects we highlighted were the violence that could ensue from the elections due to the distorted influence of troublemakers and the unfair propaganda used by the various parties. A few days before the end of the Mission we all met in the capital to discuss the election results, to say our goodbyes before returning to Europe and for the farewell party. My great friend Miguel, Head of the core team for logistics and a great dancer, didn't fail to try — as he had done on all our previous Missions together — to teach me Latin American dances such as salsa or samba, and although I always promised that I would learn, I never gave in to his request.

My experience in Guatemala ended in the most romantic way possible, as Naledi, very lovingly, accompanied me to the airport and waited until I boarded my flight.

When I got back to Italy I felt that the time had come to reduce my participation in international Missions as much as possible. The following year, however, I left for two Missions: first in Ecuador and a few months later in Bolivia.



## Chapter 11

# **Quantum medicine and my last international Missions: Ecuador and Bolivia**

### **Quantum medicine**

It was now already 2008. I decided to accept Valentin's invitation to go and stay with him in Sofia following an intriguing proposal: spend ten days with him and his family and try out an experimental therapy that was also a bit mysterious. It consisted in having foot baths in water with a flow of low-voltage electricity which boosted circulation. I felt slightly better after the therapy. During that period I also discovered quantum medicine, which I was eager to look into. When I got back to Italy I began frantically gathering information on quantum medicine in relation to multiple sclerosis and on current research in this field. At that time this «branch» was regarded as being quite effective.

According to the researcher Piergiorgio Spaggiari, biological dynamics are dominated by electrochemical and bioenergy mechanisms, by molecular events following one another in an orderly manner in space and time. The codes identifying the different biomolecules (such as those identifying DNA bases) show how living

matter acts according to standard patterns. The very existence of said codes suggests the presence of an electromagnetic level of the living matter that communicates with the chemical level, thus directing molecular traffic. In this perspective, the disease appears to be in the first place an anomaly of the body's molecular structure and in the second place a disorder affecting the «electromagnetic network controlling molecular traffic».

Therefore, quantum medicine:

1. intervenes directly at the chemical level of the organism, by providing chemical substances capable of removing the anomaly present in the molecular structure;
2. intervenes at the electromagnetic level, by removing barriers that block the molecular traffic.

Back in 2008, some practical applications already existed. One is Seqex, a machine realised on the bases of bioenergetics and quantum biophysics, designed to restore the individual's magnetic field. Seqex is an alternative to taking drugs and it is believed to have no contraindications. Some hospitals had started using it several years before alongside traditional medicine, and the results were astonishing.

But how does it work? The patient is made to lie on a mat connected to Seqex, electrodes are placed on certain points of his body, a test is run and it is recorded on a card. The test uses the «endogenous ion cyclotron resonance», that is, very low and precise electromagnetic codes that drive the repolarisation process of cell membranes: the magnetic fields thus created positively influence the intracellular and membrane enzyme systems, modifying their permeability and therefore boosting the ion exchange on both sides of the membrane and the immune system.

The cure based on electromagnetism, founded on the «vibratory» principle — in other words on the fact that every individual has

a certain specific vibration — dates back more than 40 years. Since then, more than 30 frequency waves have been identified and tested on diseases that conventional medicine is unable to cure. Children with autism, hereditary eye diseases leading to total blindness, cancer, psoriasis, multiple sclerosis, allergies, blood circulation problems, etc. have been treated with Seqex. During my research I found out that Sant'Angelo Lodigiano had a hospital where experimentation with Seqex had been carried out for many years. I managed to book a three-week hospitalisation in September and I was treated with the ion cyclotron resonance and a lot of physiotherapy, with beneficial results. I focused on quantum medicine for quite some time, promising myself to return to Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, but I lacked the will to put this into practice.

## **Ecuador and Bolivia**

In early October, after being selected for the Mission in Ecuador, I had a severe crisis twenty days before departure and I collapsed helplessly on the floor in my living room. Before passing out I managed to call an ambulance on my cell phone. Shortly after (so I was told) a truck with some firemen and a Red Cross ambulance arrived. The firemen weren't able to get in through the front door, so they had to break in through the French-window overlooking the garden. The medical staff helped me to regain consciousness, verified my general state and, with the help of a fireman, put me on my bed, urging me to have a check-up as soon as possible. The next morning I booked a check-up and the neurologists had no choice but to prescribe a cycle of cortisone drip that I finished just two days before leaving for Ecuador.

I took part in the European Union's Election Observation Mission for the Constitutional Referendum in Ecuador and I was sent to a very interesting part of the country, as my area of responsibility

comprised the provinces of Orellana, Napo and Sucumbios, in the heart of the Amazon, near the Brazilian border. On all the Missions I participated in I always hoped to be deployed far from the capital, from wealth and a consumer society which is often very different from the way of life of the indigenous people. In this, my choice contrasted with that of my fellow observers, who preferred to be near the capital where there was more likelihood of them being noticed by the core team and where they could take part in prestigious meetings with the local authorities and with the various Embassies in the capital, including the EU's Representation Office. In the provinces falling within our area of responsibility we established friendly relations with indigenous people. These people were in many cases from very remote communities and clung to their ancient customs and traditions; they more often than not spoke no Spanish and shrank away from town-life.

The provinces of Orellana, Napo and Sucumbios have lush vegetation and are rich in water with their rivers, lakes and waterfalls. One day we had to cross one of these streams, which was near a market place, but when we were more or less half-way across, we realised that we had miscalculated the depth: we had thought that the water was shallower than it actually was our jeep (which was almost amphibious) started sinking and we were stuck. Luckily, a barge carrying people and goods from one riverbank to the other was coming our way and it hoisted our jeep on board, so we reached the other side of the river safe and sound.

Our hotel had a luxuriant garden with lots of animals, many different and brightly coloured parrots, snakes, small crocodiles (which, to be on the safe side, were kept in tanks!), small animals resembling wild boars and no end of monkeys. We always had to remember to close our rooms properly to prevent animals from getting in.

My last electoral Mission started a few months later in Bolivia and it was the most difficult of all, owing to my health, but for this very reason it was the one I enjoyed the most. Thanks to my many acquaintances in the logistics section of the Mission I managed to fly




from Rome to La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, with a stopover in Buenos Aires (to my fellow observers' surprise), where I had the opportunity to see my friend Pablo and finish a research I was particularly keen on, which I had started several years before. I always had a very close relationship with my grandfather, as we shared an adventurous character and a real passion for photography.

Giovanni Meloni — that was his name — was born in Narbolia (which at that time was in the province of Cagliari) in 1892 and he left for Argentina in 1908 when he was only sixteen, probably declaring that he was 25. When he arrived in Buenos Aires he went to an employment agency and found work as a farm labourer.


In 1914 he decided to return to Italy on foot, walking all the way from Buenos Aires, with four other people, presumably during the first half of the year. The original plan was simply.

Museo Nacional de la Inmigración



Ministerio del Interior  
Presidencia de la Nación


**DNM** Dirección Nacional de Migraciones  
Ministerio del Interior



**CEMLA**  
Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos

## Certificado de arribo a América

**GIOVANNI MELONI**  
de Nacionalidad **ITALIANA**  
procedente de **GENOVA**  
llegó a **BUENOS AIRES**  
27 de Octubre de 1908  
en el buque **BOLOGNA**



Sus datos de origen son:

Edad	: 25 años
Estado Civil	: SOLTERO
Profesión	: AGRICULTOR
Religión	: CATOLICA
Nacido	: DESCONOCIDO

La información consignada en el presente certificado es la que consta en el Registro de Migraciones de la Dirección Nacional de Población y Migraciones. No obstante, este Certificado no tiene validez para efectos legales en el extranjero.

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Giovanni Meloni's certificate of arrival in Latin America.

Buenos Aires-Rome, but they only got as far as El Callao, in Peru, where the Italian Consul summoned them and informed them that the First World War had broken out and that they might be called to arms. There were originally five of them, but only three reached their destination; two of them stopped along the way, probably during the difficult crossing of the Andean Cordillera. From Buenos Aires they walked all the way across Argentina, they reached and crossed Lake Titicaca and carried on across the Andean Cordillera until they got to El Callao. They admired Bolivia from high up, although they did descend to the capital to meet the authorities and to be cheered by the people. Giovanni Meloni stayed in Peru until 1920 and he came back via the Panama Canal, perhaps on the first day the canal was opened to vessels. In Buenos Aires I furthered some contacts I had traced when I was in Italy and I gathered information about my grandfather. Finally, at the Latin American Migratory Studies Centre, I found (and obtained a copy of) his «*Certificado de Arribo a América*».

For the first time ever, the fact of being quite well-known in Brussels enabled me to ask and be sent to Cochabamba, a town located at 2,500 meters above sea level, which, therefore, had a cool climate. However, our area of responsibility was very vast. I remember that during that Mission we decided to go first to an area located over 4,000 meters above sea level, with a temperature below zero, and two days later to a place in the Amazon, at sea level, with a temperature over 35 degrees Celsius.

In Cochabamba, during a conference on indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, I got to know a young woman who was the head of an indigenous Aymara group, who spoke little Spanish and was soon due to go to Europe to partake in a series of meetings. We were on friendly terms and kept in contact for several months. In a town in the Amazon region in Bolivia we also met Evo Morales, from Orinoca, in the Oruro department, who had come to visit the

Cochabamba department on that important occasion to pull votes. Morales won the elections that year and became the first indigenous president (of the Aymara group) in the history of Latin America.

Unfortunately, first in Ecuador and then in Bolivia I realised that I could no longer work on Missions. One day in Ecuador, as I was walking along the street, I fell over unexpectedly; I didn't hurt myself and some indigenous people that were sitting nearby helped me to my feet. Everything turned out to be extremely difficult in Cochabamba, I was overwhelmed by fatigue and I dreaded going to the Amazonian areas where, because of the terrible heat, I could do nothing but sit down in the shade.



Members of the Arque community, Bolivia.



Other — mixed — members of the community of Arque, Bolivia.

I could only walk very short distances at a time and almost all my movements were by jeep, even though the distance to cover was usually very short. I could only carry very light loads and I am convinced that it's only thanks to the skill of my teammate Ana Paula that our team was able to complete our tasks. I was very fond of Ana Paula and grateful to her. One day, on the way back from one of our areas of observation in the Amazon I took her hand and said: «I want to tell you something important and very confidential: *sabes, esta es mi última misión....*» And indeed, the one in Bolivia was the last international Mission which I took part in. Although over the last years I had carefully chosen what Missions to apply for based on the climate and the risk of infectious diseases, my condition was

getting worse, as I was getting weaker and weaker, and this called for limitations in my working life.

Meanwhile, I was now at the secondary stage of MS, and I had started a new therapy with Mitoxantrone, a strong immuno-suppressant with bad side effects, which I took every two to three months. Obviously, all Missions revolved around the timeline of this treatment. Nevertheless, I applied for other Missions, but only to withdraw shortly after. Needless to say, it was hard for me not to see all the friends I had shared so many Missions with and to be forced to give all of this up, even though I must say that rarely had I met anybody as convinced as I was about the crucial importance of electoral Missions and of their role in building up confidence with regard to the strengthening of democracy in these countries.

On the other hand, what helped me greatly from a psychological point of view was to remind myself that I had long tired of that life with so few reference points, skipping from one Mission to another, and besides, I ardently wished to settle down in Italy or abroad. In other words, I wasn't forced to give up International Missions, I simply chose not to participate anymore. I furthered my search for university courses where I could lecture on Human Rights, Democracy and Electoral Observation Missions, which I had studied a novel approach for, based on my experience in Democracy and Human Rights and my on-the-field knowledge concerning Electoral Observations, but soon I realised how difficult it was to teach these subjects in Italy, as they are, it seems, not a priority. Moreover, I don't have the most suitable degree and nobody knows me in the academic environment...

My research for alternative therapies for my companion in life goes on.



## Chapter 12

# **Democracy and Human Rights. The European Union and Election Observation Missions**

In order to take a closer look at the Missions I had the honour to take part in I think I should, first of all, point out what is meant by Democracy and how it is related to Human Rights, and then consider the structure of the EU's election Missions. The contents of this chapter have also been the subject of my lectures at university. The first part is mainly based on David Beetham's work *Democracy and Human Rights*, whilst I consulted the website of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs at length with respect to the part on the European Union Election Observation Missions.

### **Definition of Democracy and relations between Democracy and Human Rights**

I think it is necessary to explain the concepts of Democracy and Human Rights, which are so often misunderstood in our society. In fact, there is no univocal definition of Democracy.

The definition of Democracy that I prefer, and which is also the most commonly accepted definition, dates back to 1947 and was coined by the economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter:

The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will.

Therefore, given a particular group of individuals, a collective decision-making system can be considered democratic if it is subject to the control of all the members of the group, having equal standing.

Democracy can be understood as being a way to make decisions concerning collectively binding rules and conducts, which people can control. The most democratic system is that in which all members of a community have the same rights to take part directly in decision-making.

The two fundamental principles underlying Democracy are:

- Popular control
- Political equality.

For society as a whole, control is mediated rather than direct, as it is in a parliamentary republic.

- Human Rights can be divided into the following categories:
- Civil and Political Rights;
- Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
- «Third generation» Rights: the Right to Peace, the Right to Development and Environmental Rights.



Democracy and Human Rights have always been considered as phenomena belonging to two distinct areas in the political sphere: the first deals with the organisation of a government, whilst the second, Human Rights, concerns individual rights and their safeguard.

Democracy essentially deals with constitutional issues and the exercise of public authority, whilst the focus of Human Rights is on the individual and the underlying aim is to guarantee the minimum conditions necessary for individuals to lead a decent life.

While Human Rights are universal and are governed by international definitions and rules, the Constitutional provisions of governments, in compliance with the principle of sovereignty, have always been regarded as an internal matter of the state. However, nowadays this separation is no longer acceptable. The collapse of the communist regimes through popular pressure has shown that not only Democracy, but also Human Rights are a universal aspiration, and not merely a localised form of government. Furthermore, the abuse of Human Rights by all Dictatorships, regardless of their political colour, has provided much evidence that the type of political system within a State determines the standard of Human Rights enjoyed by its citizens.

The fundamental element for the realisation of a Democracy is the guarantee of freedom of expression, movement, association — freedoms understood as individual rights having special legal or constitutional protection.

Democratic rights are the individual rights necessary to ensure the people's control over the collective decision-implementation process.

The separation of the executive, legislative and judicial power, as well as the establishment of a representative assembly holding the power to legislate and exercising control over the action of the executive, are essential.

We ought to speak about the principle of the «limited State» and about the clear separation between public and private interests. The only criterion for the «public good» lies in what people, in a freely

organised form, choose, since there is no «ultimate truth» of what is good for society. Democracy is promoted through Self-determination of both a community and individual citizens, in order to ensure that they, too, can partake in decision-making.

The relation between Democracy and Human Rights is recognised to be getting gradually stronger, according to both the Agencies that deal with Human Rights and the foreign policies of Western governments and of the European Union. By way of example, we can take into consideration the clauses on Human Rights in economic agreements — conditions which a non-EU country must comply with in order to sign an agreement, under penalty of termination of said agreement and imposition of economic and political restrictions against the State in breach of such clauses. When irregularities in the conduct of elections are detected by EU Observers during an Election Mission, this can result in the imposition of sanctions insofar as said conduct represents an infringement of the above-mentioned clauses of the economic agreements that that particular State entered into with the European Union.

Therefore, the institutional measures necessary to ensure popular control are:

- Electoral Competition;
- Representative Legislature able to control the power of the executive on behalf of the electorate;
- Independent judicial system;
- Independent media able to report on the action of the government and give voice to public opinion;
- Personal responsibility in the case of maladministration (e.g.: Ombudsman).

Without freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement, people would not be able to voice their needs, with

respect to the organisation of civil society and to issues of government policy.

*The foundations of Democracy are the Rights laid down in the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Council of Europe, 1950) and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of the General Assembly of the United Nations (1966).*

Collective decisions limit individual freedom of choice, and this inevitably creates a certain tension between the collective and the individual level.

The limits of collective decisions should be defined within the human rights agenda. And, indeed, a democratic debate should establish the point of balance between collective decisions and individual rights.

Western governments have always placed greater emphasis on Civil and Political Rights rather than on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, notwithstanding the fact that the two categories of rights are indivisible and Democracy should safeguard both.

Is the protection of the citizens' Economic and Social Rights a prerequisite for Democracy?

Do Economic and Social Rights exist only insofar as Democracy exists?

Does Democracy need economic development?

As the UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights has repeatedly stated, «low levels of economic development do not release Member States from their obligations under the Convention they entered into, whatever their level of development».

To what extent do Economic and Social Rights depend on Democracy?

Are economic inequalities actually compatible with the democratic principle of equality?

What value, for example, can the right to a fair trial or the possibility of being elected have, if such rights, in fact, apply only to

the upper classes? Civil and political equality can be seriously compromised if the privileged can use their wealth or their social status to gain undue political influence or if, on the other hand, the poor are left destitute, to the point that they are unable to enjoy any civil and political rights, and are, in fact, excluded from public life.

It is necessary «to limit the influence that wealth has over politics, by enacting laws that prevent the concentration of media ownership, that limit the possible expenditure for electoral campaigns and that lay down the obligation to disclose the financial sources of the political parties’, and so on».

To be able to exercise our rights, primary needs must be attainable: housing, clean drinking water, medical care. The failure to guarantee social and economic rights is detrimental to Democracy, in the first place because it limits the full status of citizens whose rights, as well as their faculty to exercise the same, are not protected. Civil and political exclusion goes hand in hand with economic exclusion.

In the second place, the failure to protect social and economic rights results in a reduced quality of public life for everybody, owing to the loss of security in respect of private property and of the individual. Ultimately, said failure eats away at the legitimacy of democratic institutions and makes them more vulnerable to being overthrown.

There is wide consent nowadays in asserting that Democracy is a prerequisite for the protection of Economic and Social Rights. Economic policies must be publicly justified and their consequences must be verified on an independent basis. Democracy can empower common people, so economic policies must meet their needs. Cultural rights are set forth in the International Covenant on Economic,

Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations. These include the Right to Education, necessary to enjoy economic rights. Education enables people to understand what civil and political rights they have and to effectively exercise them. Therefore, Education is the foundation of any Political and Economic Right, the denial of

which impairs the democratic principle of civil and political equality. Non-discriminatory access to Education is essential to ensure equality, which is the underlying principle of Democracy. Education is a fundamental individual right, necessary for the effective exercise of all the other Rights.

In conclusion, Civil and Political Rights are an integral part of Democracy; without them, the latter would be a contradiction in terms: without freedom of speech, association, assembly, movement, security of individuals and fair trial, elections would be fictitious and any popular control over government would be impossible.

Economic and Social Rights on the one hand and Democracy on the other can be deemed to be «mutually dependent». The absence of the former would affect civil and political equality, quality of public life, and the functioning of the democratic institutions themselves; on the other hand, Democracy is a necessary condition for the protection of Social and Economic Rights. In a multicultural society whose chief aim is to achieve equality, the defence of Cultural Rights cannot be guaranteed except by a revised concept of Democracy and its procedures. In contemporary society, Democracy must be considered such not only from a political standpoint, but also from a social and pluralistic point of view. To what extent can the criteria applicable to a Western Democracy be applied to developing countries?

The very concept of Democracy is universal because the form of the modern state, with its monopoly in creating laws and the power to implement them, is universal.

Is there any point in asking ourselves how a political system can become more democratic, that is, how to promote democratization?

Only those who are engaged in the fight for democratic rights in the developing countries are able to evaluate which criteria should inspire their political systems.

A system can be considered democratic «to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair,

honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote» (S.P. Huntington). Therefore, the electoral process is a salient feature of Democracy, together with freedom of speech and association, which are necessary in order to make the whole process effective.

## **The European Union and Election Observation Missions**

The European Union has developed a comprehensive strategy with the objective of defining a method in the field of support and monitoring of elections in third countries.

The right to be part of the government of one's own country is established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Therefore, an appropriate legal framework for elections and a transparent and accountable electoral administration must be set up. Consequently, supervision and independent observation are necessary with a view to ensuring the rule of law. The criteria laid down by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the validation of elections which are subject to independent observation are recognised internationally. Elections must be held periodically and be free, democratic and genuine, and the voting must be secret. The fundamental aim of international observation of elections is to consolidate democracy, legitimise electoral processes, build up public confidence, prevent fraud, strengthen respect for Human Rights and contribute to conflict resolution. Its foundations are the principles of full coverage, impartiality, transparency and professionalism. Within the European Union, the intended protection of Human Rights, democracy and the rule of law is established in the Treaties. Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union states that the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law are fundamental values

common to the Member States. Support during elections is considered to be part of the Union's mandate. Since 1999, there have been two regulations forming the legal basis for the EU's support and monitoring actions during elections.

Electoral observation is becoming more and more important in the EU policy for the promotion of Human Rights and democratization worldwide. Through its election observation activities, the EU provides technical support in organising elections and verifies the actual compliance with the electoral procedures and international standards in the field.

Every year, the European Union identifies non-EU countries where election Missions can be carried out. The initial step consists in an «exploratory Mission»: a competitive procedure between specialised agencies takes place, following which two observers proposed by the successful agency and two officials of the European Commission are chosen. The exploratory Mission is sent to the country where the elections are due to be held in order to assess whether or not and how the Election Observation Mission can take place. The so-called «Memorandum of Understanding» with the Government and the Electoral Administration of the country where the elections will take place is thus drawn up, which is a prerequisite for the establishment of any Election Observation Mission.

Each Mission is made up of a «core team», of Long-Term Observers (LTOs) and Short-Term Observers (STOs).

The core team is a team of experienced observers, each entrusted with a specific task, and it is in charge of the whole Mission. The chief observer is a Member of the European Parliament, preferably with knowledge of the country and fluent in its official language. The chief observer is responsible for the entire Mission and can supervise every aspect of the same. The core team experts are chosen by the European Commission based on their experience. They submit their application directly to Brussels, answering the so-called «Call for Core

Team Exper», which is published on the website of the European Commission.

The long-term and short-term observers are pre-selected and their names are put forward to the European Commission by the Focal Point of each Member State.

Short-term observers are deployed to the field just before the date of the elections to observe voting and counting of votes; the long-term observers' task is to monitor the whole electoral process, starting approximately two months before the elections. Therefore, electoral observation is not limited to the days immediately before the elections, but covers a much longer period, including both the pre-election and the post-election phase. Here is an example of how an Election Observation Mission is structured:

- Core Team
  - Chief Observer
  - Deputy Chief Observer
  - Electoral Expert
  - Political Analyst
  - Legal Analyst
  - Media Expert
  - Press Officer
  - Statistical Analyst
  - Coordinator of Long-Term Observers
  - Logistics Expert
  - Security Expert
- Long-Term Observers (LTOs)
- Short-Term Observers (STOs)

This example refers to the typical structure EU election observation Missions had when I took part in them. For several years now, some experts of the core team, such as the expert in logistics, have



been selected through a competition between specialised agencies. Personally, I have always preferred to take part in Missions as a long-term observer, since this is the position which enables you to get to know better the area where you are deployed, establish relationships with the local people and become more familiar with their problems.



# Afterword

*Everything that is not given is lost.*

It is not easy to add anything to this intense story that offers a wide-reaching vision of the world. Nonetheless, I will take up the challenge.

I have chosen to begin this afterword with a quotation attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta and in any case to the Indian tradition to express what I felt when I read Francesco's book for the first time. I wondered at the time, and I still wonder: why did Francesco decide to break out of his innermost self and silence, which seem so characteristic, to speak about his ideals, his profession and his many commitments? And how are his ideals, profession and effort-illness related? What message does this story wish to convey?

I have focused on three central issues that I pinpointed in Francesco's story and that somehow go beyond the questions mentioned above. It is not for me to give any answers because an afterword rounds off a book and does not add anything to the author's message.

If anything, the afterword is designed to invite the reader to «carry on thinking about the book» after he has finished reading it. Perhaps some of us will find our own explanations and even answers, or — why not — new questions may arise. In this way we might take in and appreciate Francesco's gift.

*A Story.* I read this story as I would have listened to a hard-working man who believes in what he does telling the story of his life. I must admit that my view is slightly distorted owing to my profession (I am an educationist), even more so at present, due to my strong desire to understand the effort of many men and women, whether young or not so young (and even unemployed) to practice a profession and in any case have a job. Francesco's is also a Story in the classic sense: of civic stories, of peoples, of conflicts, of peace, but I will go into this in the second point of my brief note.

I have tried to underline all the pages where Francesco talks about his work with passion and I came to the conclusion that almost every page of the book reflects this passion. First of all, we see Francesco, still very young, becoming aware of his curiosity and talent, and we read about his endeavours in studying a science as complex as nuclear physics, which he pursued whole-heartedly. «Therefore, in my opinion, focusing on the «smallest», on the elements closest to us, is the key to addressing the problems of life, however big they may seem.» Moreover, let's think about the non-linearity of his choice, that is, switching from Nuclear Physics to Political Science and then to the practical implementation of Democracy. Another passage of Francesco's story: «In June 1998, after being turned down in 1996 and in 1997, I doggedly and successfully applied again for the third (and last...) time for a place on the training course of the Civilian Personnel of Humanitarian Operations, Peace-keeping and Election Observation Missions organised by the *Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna* of Pisa». Immediately after, Francesco writes: «My first election Mis-

sion was very promising; I worked with Gunilla, who was on her first electoral Mission like me.» This — his work — is the key to all of Francesco's professional experience and to understanding what entering working life means, what the expectations, the unforeseen events, the successes and the failures are.

I did, however, wonder: why write about a professional experience? And why do it now? Francesco manages to put it down in writing and this, somehow, intrigues us and maybe wins us over. In fact, Francesco's work is inspired by noble ideals and by the awareness of having a talent that is never self-complacent, whose strength and motivation, on the contrary, make it stand out from the rest. Francesco's story on the one hand dwells on a job that is nobly-inspired and enriching, and on the other hand it reveals the difficult and trying aspects of it, to the point when it comes to a halt and a change of direction.

Let's consider the positive elements of Francesco's work experience.

Work is «profession», that is, «to profess». It is difficult to identify the boundary between one's own sensitivity and intelligence, and method, perseverance and risk. We can, nevertheless, concede that Francesco's is a niche job and that he is, after all, privileged, but any one of us can, in fact, come across such strokes of luck during our professional life, it is up to us not to miss them. Work is life's leitmotif, connecting each day. It has an absolute anthropological dimension, like eating and drinking, even though, in a classification which is a bit dated in my opinion (Maslow), it is regarded as a second-level need.

What, indeed, becomes of us when there is no work at hand, when meeting the mere primary needs is not enough to make our existence meaningful? Work raises our morale. That is not of little account! Massimo Recalcati (a well-known psychoanalyst in his fifties) says that a man and his desire are one and the same thing, and that life goes on only insofar as that desire is realised. Furthermore, he

says that it is right to accept life's twists and turns. We haven't dwelt upon what thoughts must have crossed Francesco's parents' minds when, after he had graduated in Physics, they saw him set off as a volunteer on a peace Mission. There is such a lack of adventurous opportunities nowadays! And when somebody tries to follow such complex paths they are described by the self-righteous as «children in search of adventure» (just think about the comments concerning the kidnapping and release of two young volunteers in Syria). According to the school of thought of empowerment, we need to release the «desiring self» in order to express all the motivation underlying a skill. These are the hot topics we must recover at this historic time in history of labour crisis and lack of hope.

We must then consider the importance of socialisation at work and lifelong learning. As regards socialisation, Francesco's need to be with his fellow observers is very clear, and his need not only to think constantly with the others, but also to increase knowledge in a participatory way is evident. This theory — the theory of socio-constructivism — should accompany young people throughout their school years and be an integral part of lifelong training at work. Finally, socialisation takes place — or can take place — at a more intimate level: it manifests itself through the need to share one's own personal experiences. Sometimes this is possible, sometimes it is difficult — but usually, higher the ideals are, the more difficult it becomes to share them with others. In these «extreme» professional fields (humanitarian aid workers or, to put it in «better» words, peace keepers) the fatigue and experience common to all the parties involved is a pretty widespread feeling. Paraphrasing: the condition of the prisoner and the jailer, the soldier and the rebel standing up for his rights, the peacemaker and those who are hoping and waiting for peace. Some professions imply the crossing of very hazy boundaries, which can only be carried out on field. Some jobs lead us into hot zones and we are lucky when we manage to recreate a sort of family

notwithstanding adversities. We cannot fail to notice the numerous affectionate relationships that Francesco creates with the many female fellow observers he comes across: they probably helped to fuel his profession. Work, that is, profession, that is, to profess.

Lifelong learning is something that does not characterise all workers. Alas, education is not always up to standard. At a certain point during his work experience, Francesco decides to take a break, he stops, applies for a Master course, since he wishes to work with more important Organizations. Is he driven by ambition? Maybe, but his first and foremost driving force is method, the ability to search within and look for new masters (Galtung and others). We could talk at length about the social identity of this aid worker. It is like a real outer «skin» which is welcoming but which at the same time must be defended. Moreover, in order to keep the challenge going, there are languages to learn, cultures to understand and relationships to build on mutual trust.

All this expresses a desire to learn.

Let's now take a closer look at the critical side of Francesco's work. A job also implies competitiveness, setbacks, mistakes. I cannot fail to acknowledge Francesco's coming to terms with a limit. In this regard we have a lot to learn from him. His professional life developed alongside his illness. He accepted it as part of his life. He was never anxious — yes, he had fears, but he never panicked. It is as if the objective physiological limits set by his profession — such particular work, by the way — were outranked by another exquisitely human dimension of courage. There is no such thing as an absolute high-performing physical standard: a person can become an excellent professional in many different ways. It is a gamble and a challenge that befuddles us. What? Why not simply step into the role of victim? Why not resort to the disability benefits and await support? What can a «sick man» have to offer to society? He has a lot to give, indeed. Putting the opening phrase into other words: if one wants to give,

and he is free to give! To face a disease actively, use medical science in an intelligent manner, and not be a passive patient, not to accept one's own condition with supine resignation and refuse to be a guinea-pig, use the community resources only insofar as necessary without overdoing it and then give back what one has received is an example of generative welfare, which is quite different from traditional social welfare. Some readers might consider my opinion exaggerated, but this is what I read between the lines of Francesco's narration. Even now that he can hardly travel anymore, Francesco finds it hard to resign himself to witnessing events from the outside. If we consider that Francesco's ultimate goal — his jewel, we could say — has always been Democracy, that is, the only kind of community that helps both the active and the needy, his endeavours are even more commendable. Obstinate democracy despite my degenerative disease. This, too, is work, and Francesco is the living proof of it.

*The Echo.* An echo resounds from the fact that we are the same age: we are both in our fifties, as are the well-known (and great) Paolo Fresu and our dear friend Stefano Alfonsi, I might add. I will talk about Stefano later. I like to dwell upon the fact that we are «in the middle of the journey of our life» and listening to a kind of echo that makes itself heard, starting with Francesco's words. We belong to a generation that started off with high ideals. Nowadays, though, our generation is most commonly depicted as being bored (as represented in the typical style of Italian comedies, etc.), then there are some superhero-like icons and many unfortunate people: the over-50s unemployed increased by 146% in 2013. I get very annoyed and sometimes, alas, I cannot refrain from showing it, when I chance upon people my age who think conceitedly only about their social status, who have a materialistic vision of life, read only the stock exchange lists and exploit all the possible benefits their careers offer. These people generally lack ideals. Their lives are inhabited by



cars, women, squash, traveling, golf, boats, motorcycles, or, for the well-learned, titles of honour and social prestige, and so on. Typically, they hold on to power whatever the circumstances. Of course, there are also fifty-year-olds who are strongly convinced of their ideals and ready to fight for them. Above all, there are women our age, extremely competent journalists and scientists who are at the same time loving mothers present every day in their children's life much more than the fathers are, etc. But, all in all, indifference is widespread within our age group! I notice it when influential men and women pretend not to see the many people in need. I reckon that ours is the generation that is the most unconcerned with our neighbours and devoid of a sense of solidarity in the last two centuries. This should be verified and investigated. But this is not what an echo is for. An echo is free and it resounds wherever it will.

I wonder who (whether in their fifties or not) will read this book. I like to think that Francesco's book will irritate the vainglorious, the «successful», but I also hope that it will encourage those who have lost all hope or those who have been told that they have to take early retirement. That is, the worst «social murder» that can be committed against an adult.

In this book we have Francesco who is so obstinately in the service of democracy, Paolo Fresu who uses his music to connect peoples — as reported in one of the passages — Stefano who learned Arabic when he was 50 and then enrolled in a Quranic university to gain better knowledge of inter-culture and peace. Ideals are not dead. These driving ideals are still very interesting, both for the people directly involved and for the younger people who witness what is happening. It is an indistinct echo for the benefit of all.

Yet, another echo resonates from this story. It is the theme of war and the commitment to put an end to it. My parents, and those of the people my age, experienced the Second World War and were in the habit of saying: «you can't even imagine what the war is.» They

were serious when they spoke these words but they also revealed their loving protection. They said it must be the last war to break out in the heart of the «civil» Europe. There must never be another Holocaust. But just a few decades later Europe is the scenario of war once again. The Balkan War (1992) and then Kosovo (1999) take us back only fifteen years. The most intense pages of Francesco's book are set there during that period. Many European citizens looked the other way during those years, with the risk of the same ethnic-driven crimes as in World War II being repeated. If there weren't men like Francesco who set off to extinguish the flames and try to lay new foundations for democracy, the risk would be even greater. In fact, this echo is particularly intense now, at the beginning of 2015: just think of the conflict in Ukraine — one more threat to peace in Europe. Or think about those countries, which are only just over an hour's flight away (Syria, Libya, Iraq) and you will find a meaning to Francesco's profession, or take the victims in the Mediterranean Sea seriously: people fleeing their war-torn countries. Let's hope, indeed, that there will be many others who engage in these activities, whether they are in their fifties or not, whether they are idealists or not. I must also point out the striking contrast between the costs of war (some say that the «war machine» will not be stopped because it moves the economy) and the increasingly meagre resources for medical research. Here my thoughts go to Francesco's disease but also to other diseases for which a cure could be found if more money were invested in research.

*Let's raise the stake.* To be born with an ideal is to acknowledge one's own talent and vice versa. It's up to you but also to your family, friends and the people you love to preserve such talent. We are social beings. Every talent is equally important and when it does not reveal itself straight away all it needs is self-belief. Not everyone has talents like Francesco, but some can be regarded as even more talented if we take into account what they achieve for humanity.

It does you good to write about your work. It is especially beneficial for the author. Some claim that writing an autobiography has a healing effect. But it is also an incentive for others. It opens the younger generations' eyes to the real world. The many potential careers include the professions for International Cooperation for the Development of Peoples. Not all jobs must necessarily aim at producing material goods and creating wealth. Humanitarian professions for the spreading of democracy and peace shouldn't be regarded as being of less importance.

Being an adult doesn't mean resigning oneself to the adversities of life, but transforming all experience, even the most difficult, into energy that drives us on in search of new challenges.

War should never be ignored; building democracy no matter what is a necessity that must not be put off.

The very young are observing us. They watch us, fifty-year-olds, and take in our indifference and in some cases our curiosity, but they also appreciate our tenacity; they watch the *nouveau riches*' unconcern, they witness the efforts of those who live on the margins of society, and observe the will-power of those who still want to make the world a better place. I am convinced that the very young would also like to share with us on-the-field experiences in the contexts of inter-culture and peace, both at a theoretical level and tangibly. They most certainly appreciate those who do not pretend to be anything other than themselves, those who don't lead a double life and those who, on the contrary, abandon their habitual role to help their neighbour in need (whoever he may be).

The very young are watching us and listening to us, maybe they are even reading these very words.

I can take my leave saying that what has been given here is not lost.

*Gerolamo Spreafico*



# Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Domenico Tuccinardi: thanks to his fervent interest I have gathered a group of friends on Facebook (*Francesco's best friends*) that has enabled me to raise the funds necessary to have my book translated into English. I also want to thank the International Election expert Alex Gray for his kind review of the text. I obviously wish to thank all my friends and former fellow observers of the international Missions which I took part in, who joined the Facebook group. I am indebted to Patricia Perez Gomez Delaunay for her kind support in searching for a publisher in Brussels. I am also very grateful to Mrs Silvia Vinci of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MAE) for her support, thanks to whom a copy of my book is kept in the MAE library.

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*I was able to finish this book thanks to a software program that converts voice into text, which was decisive in enabling me to work, as it had become increasingly difficult for me to use a keyboard.*

*I would like to close this pleasant experience with a beautiful phrase by the great jazz pianist Michel Petrucciani, one of the greatest and most popular jazz musicians in the world. He played the piano all his life although he had a terrible disease, called osteogenesis imperfecta (also known as «Brittle Bone Disease») which caused Michel to be deformed and prevented him from growing more than one meter in height, and that led to his premature death when he was only 36: «Most people don't understand that it is not necessary to be one meter eighty tall to be human. What matters is what you have in your head and heart. And, above all, in your soul.»*





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# GRAZIE PER AVER SCARICATO



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«His book is about the travels and encounters in life that make a person thick-skinned. It is through these that we form a hard protective shell and that at the same time we become more vulnerable *vis à vis* the world. Francesco narrates facts – and writes about himself – from behind a protective shell but also with a sincerity that reveals his weaknesses, which paradoxically represent his strength. And this very strength is what gave him a reason, in all these years, to face the complex realities in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America in his role as International Observer in the service of peace. His obstinacy in wanting to travel the winding roads of peoples in need and the progression of multiple sclerosis, are the key to reading this real-life story. Therefore, *Obstinacy in the Service of Democracy* is a warning and an example at the same time. It reminds us how delicate our relationships with our neighbours are, and it is also a challenge to everyday life, with its difficulties and its successes, to show how the desire to live to the full always has the upper hand.»

*From Paolo Fresu's foreword*



#### FRANCESCO MUGHEDDU

Francesco Mugheddu was born in Oristano, a small town near the western coast of Sardinia where he lived until he was thirty-five, which he still has strong ties with. He now lives in Montecitorio, in the province of Rome. He graduated in Physics and then specialised in Human Rights and Democratization. His activities within the international Missions developed alongside a serious disease, which was diagnosed just the day before he left on his first long-term international Mission in Kosovo, and that progressively limited his participation in subsequent Missions, until it prevented him from taking part altogether.

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